

Harry's Redheads

How it happened

...“Hermione – Neville’s right – you are a girl”

“Oh well spotted” she said acidly

“Well - you can come with one of us!”

“No I can’t!” Hermione snapped ... “because I’m already going with someone else!”

... “She’s lying” Ron said, flatly, watching her go

“She’s not” said Ginny quietly

“Who is it then?” said Ron sharply

“I’m not telling you, it’s her business” said Ginny

“Right” said Ron, who looked extremely put out “this is getting stupid. Ginny you can go with Harry and I’ll just ---“

Goblet of Fire – page 400

1 A Different Yule Ball

Harry was totally caught off guard by the idea. He said the first thing that came to mind “Uhh...Ron Professor McGonagall said it was for Fourth Years and above”

“Actually, the notice says ‘Anyone may invite a younger student – if they wish’ said Ginny. She didn’t look up from her book and her voice betrayed no emotion.

“Well, maybe Ginny’s already going with someone” Harry said, looking at Ron.

This time, Ginny looked up, and she was rather annoyed “Maybe Ginny can answer that for herself” she said.

“A-ba-ur” stammered Harry. It occurred to him that they had been talking about Ginny as if she wasn’t even there. He looked down at her and away from Ron “You’re absolutely right. We’re sorry. Ginny, do you have a date for the Ball?” he asked.

Ginny fought desperately against the blush she felt coming and said “I thought Neville was going to ask me after Hermione said no” Harry stuffed his hands in his pockets and started to look away. Dumb Ginny! Dumb Ginny! What did you say that for! She thought

“Did Neville ask you or not?” asked Harry.

Ginny shook her head and said “No, Harry, Neville didn’t ask me. No one else did too...er...either”

“Ginny, will you go to the Ball with me?” asked Harry, suddenly nervous. He crossed his fingers in his robes.

Ron goggled at Harry.

Ginny blushed furiously “Yes, alright then” she replied

“Great! Thank you!” said Harry, happily. He wasn’t sure why, but Ginny Weasley blushing for him again suddenly seemed like a good thing. Harry’s pleasure was interrupted by Ron muttering to himself sullenly. Harry thought furiously for a solution. As luck would have it Parvati and Lavender came in through the portrait hole “Hold on a minute” he said, running after them.

“Hi Harry” Lavender said. Both girls giggled and whispered to each other.

Harry waited impatiently for them to stop, then he asked “Are you girls going to the Ball with anyone yet?”

“I’m going with Seamus” Lavender answered

Parvati blushed and said "I'm available, Harry, why are you asking?"

"Err...actually...I have a date, Ginny Weasley" Harry replied "But Ron doesn't. Do you think you would...?"

"What about Hermione Granger?" Parvati asked

Harry shook his head and said "She's going with someone else"

Parvati looked back at Ron and giggled. She waggled her fingers at him "I might, but he has to ask me" she said

"Ok" said Harry 'Why can't things be easy' he wondered "Ron, Parvati isn't going with anyone" he said, mentally begging Ron to take the hint.

Ginny poked Ron not-so-subtly in the kidneys and he jumped "Ummm...right...er" Ron stammered "Ahh Parvati will you go to the Ball with me?"

"I'd love to" said Parvati, giggling furiously. She ran a finger under Ron's chin then hightailed it for the Girls' Dormitory, with Lavender following close on her heels.

"What the bloody hell was that about?" Ron asked, looking up the stairs.

Ginny rolled her eyes and said "It means, oh thick one, that she is happy you asked her" she repeated the gesture on Harry and vanished as well.

During the week leading up to Christmas, Harry found himself playing matchmaker again. The heavy load of holiday homework had gotten to him and he was turning in early. In the Fourth Year dorms he found Neville grumbling to himself, miserably. "What's got you down, Nev?" asked Harry, concerned for his friend.

"Missed my chance to go to the Ball" Neville mumbled.

Harry felt very guilty “Ginny said you almost asked her. I’m sorry about that, mate” he said

“I’m not angry at you, Harry” Neville replied “It’s my fault for not asking her right then” he slumped down and pointed his wand at the top of his bed. The curtains closed around him.

Harry made his way back to the Common Room “Hey, Parvati” he called out “I was wondering if you knew anyone who still doesn’t have a date for the Ball”

“As a matter of fact, no one asked my sister” she replied.

Harry looked confused “I didn’t know you had one” he said “I’ve never seen her here”

“My twin...Padma...she’s in Ravenclaw” Parvati replied testily

Harry looked away from her glare “Ohh...sorry about that” he said, lamely

“Forget it. Who did you have in mind?” she asked.

“Err... Neville Longbottom” he replied hesitantly “You see...he almost asked Ginny and---”

Parvati cut him off “Say no more” she said “Longbottom’s got some potential”

“Potential what?” asked Harry.

Parvati rolled her eyes at him “You’re hopeless” she said “Boyfriend potential, of course. Here’s a tip, Ginny Weasley is thinking the same thing about you. I’ll go talk to Padma”

Harry was left with this new thought to ponder. He didn’t ask Ginny about it during the next few days. He thought about asking Ron, but dismissed it. Hermione wasn’t very helpful, as she just told him to talk to Ginny. So, he sent a letter to Sirius. But, unfortunately, by Christmas he hadn’t replied. Harry was left with a new reason to hate

the fact that Sirius was on the run. Professor McGonagall had actually been the most helpful in telling him that he needed to get Ginny a corsage for the Ball. He had ordered that for delivery on Christmas Eve. Ginny had been so delighted with it that she kissed his cheek. She hadn't blushed, this time Harry did.

At five o'clock every Common Room in Hogwarts became a boys only zone as the girls vanished to their rooms to get ready.

"How could it possibly take you three hours?" asked Ron. He wasn't alone in asking "And you still haven't told me who you're going with!" He yelled to Hermione. Unfortunately for Ron's curiosity, she disappeared with a wave.

Harry, his mind still in turmoil over Parvati's comment about Ginny, waited nervously in the Common Room with his dormmates. After the twentieth time, he gave up trying to flatten his hair. But he had redone his bowtie a dozen times and had brushed his brand new robes at least that many.

"What're you worried about, mate, it's only Ron's little sister" said Dean.

Harry growled at him "Bugger yourself, Dean!" he cursed

"Touchy, touchy" Dean teased "Don't think that's possible, even with magic. Besides I'm more interested in how Ron landed one of the two best- looking girls in our year"

"Just lucky I guess" Ron replied, not sounding at all happy. His robes were a disaster and he still didn't know who Hermione's date was. Parvati came down and a look of disappointment flashed across her face. Ron didn't miss it. "Err...sorry about this" he apologized.

"It'll be alright" said Parvati, more to convince herself.

They walked over to Harry "You didn't happen to see Hermione, did you?" Ron was asking her.

"Yes" replied Parvati "She left almost an hour ago"

Ron was dumbfounded “Do you know who her date is?” he asked.

“Yes she did” Parvati answered, testily “And don’t bother asking me! She told me not to” Parvati took to sulking. Harry gave her an apologetic look and she shrugged.

Dean whistled appreciatively “Whheeeeww! I wonder whose girl this is. Awesome legs!”

“That’s my sister you smarmy git!!” Ron snarled.

Harry looked up, he pushed at his hair again and swallowed hard. He took her hand and wrapped their arms together “That would be me” he said with a smirk “Excuse us boys”

“What was that about?” Ginny asked, curiously.

“Can it wait until after I tell you how pretty you look?” Harry replied.

Even Ginny’s ears turned red “Th-th-thank y-y-ou” she stammered “Y-y-you lo-lo-look han-handsome, too”

As they reached the Great Hall, Harry asked “Not that I’m like Ron, but where is Hermione?”

“Over there” Ginny pointed

Harry turned from looking at the beautifully decorated Hall, to see where Ginny was pointing. He saw the Durmstrang students with Professor Karkaroff, but no Hermione. The girl who was Viktor Krum’s date, waved at him. He smiled slightly and waved back. Ginny covered her mouth and giggled. He was about to ask why, when Professor McGonagall asked for the Champions to stand by her. While everyone else filed in, she explained that the Champions were to enter after the students were seated.

He introduced Ginny to Roger Davies and Fleur. Roger ignored them in favor of staring at Fleur.

"Oh, what a sweet leetle girl!" Fleur said. She patted Ginny on the head, then she turned back to Roger.

Ginny gave her a death glare, but Harry turned her to greet Cedric and Cho.

'Odd seeing them together doesn't bother me' he thought. He turned to Viktor and his date "Viktor, this is Ginny Weasley. Ginny, Viktor Krum" said Harry.

"A pleasure" said Viktor as he kissed Ginny's hand "I belef you already know my date"

"Hey Ginny" she said "Hi Harry, you look very nice"

That was when it hit him. "Wow, Hermione!" he exclaimed "You look great!"

"Thanks" she said shyly.

Harry saw several girls, with their dates, walk by giving Hermione nasty looks. What surprised him was when Ron did, too, only he looked away before Hermione saw him. Entering the Hall, Harry felt like a First Year. Everyone was clapping. Except, Harry noticed as they passed, Ron who was eyeing Hermione narrowly. Parvati also had an unhappy expression, though she was directing it at Ron.

"Sit by me, Harry" said Percy as they reached the main table, indicating a chair.

Harry waved a hand, politely declining "Oh no" he said "Ginny should sit next to you. After all you're her brother"

"Ginevra" Percy said "I did not know you were going to be here"

Ginny sat down and gave Percy a cold look "Hello Percival" she said "Maybe you would've if you visited Mum and Dad occasionally."

"I got promoted" Percy said, proudly, ignoring his sister.

“Maybe he meant to promote Weatherby” said Ginny sarcastically.

Harry snorted in amusement, then covered it with a cough. He didn’t want to get in the middle of that “Excuse me” he said “Err...congratulations...Percy. That’s good”

“Yes, I’m now Mr. Crouch’s executive assistant...” said Percy importantly.

Percy kept talking, but Harry tuned him out in favor of food. Ron had complained loudly over the cruelty of delaying a meal for two extra hours. Harry had gone for days without eating at the Dursleys, but that didn’t mean his stomach wasn’t feeling a little empty. He looked at the menu. His choice magically appeared and he started in. Ginny, he noticed, was matching him bite for bite.

“Getting dressed is hard work” she joked when she realized what he was looking at.

Harry laughed. He found himself enjoying Ginny’s company more and more. “Well you look beautiful” he said.

“Wow, two complements in one day, I’m honored” she replied.

“I’m not joking, Gin” said Harry.

Ginny dropped her fork and gaped at him “Thank you, Harry” she said, then she sighed contentedly and leaned her head on his shoulder.

When the Weird Sisters appeared, the Hall erupted in applause. Harry jumped at the sudden noise, disturbing Ginny, who frowned at him. “Err...sorry” he said, distractedly “Never seen even a Muggle band...they even look cool”

“I believe we have a dance coming” Ginny said uncertainly “Ahhmm...Harry can you dance?”

Harry scratched his chin “Why, can’t you?” he asked.



"I've been taking lessons since I was four" Ginny replied, slightly annoyed.

Harry stood and held out a hand "I might surprise you" he said with a wink. Ginny took it and they joined the other Champions on the dance floor. He performed every move exactly right.

"Where did that come from?!" asked Ginny, completely stunned.

Another song began, this time a slow one "I'll tell you if you dance this with me" Harry replied.

"Ok" said Ginny. She slipped her arms around his neck and felt his hands on her waist. They swayed in place, turning slowly for a minute, before Ginny said "Well, you promised"

Harry looked down slightly at her upturned face 'Flushed cheeks are really interesting' he thought. "Well, right after I asked you, the twins had one of their back and forth chats with me"

"I'll kill them, slowly" Ginny growled

"You should thank them" Harry countered "You see, they told me you were a really good dancer. So I took Professor McGonagall up on the offer she made to help anyone who wanted to learn"

"But I heard she cancelled it...lack of interest" said Ginny "Besides you had detention most of those two weeks"

Harry laughed "Even McGonagall doesn't give two weeks detention for falling asleep in class"

"You learned how to dance in two weeks?" Ginny asked, her voice a mix of awe and disbelief.

"Not exactly" he admitted "I learned this one dance because she told me it would be the first song. By doing the steps over and over again. I just didn't want to step all over your feet"

"Well that's still pretty amazing" Ginny said, still impressed "And you did that for me" she snuggled closer.

Harry was grateful she wasn't looking at his face just then as he was sure it was bright red "Yeah, well---" he started.

"Couldn't do any better than Weaselette, Potter?" Draco sneered

Harry sighed "Why don't you go pester someone else, Malfoy"

"Oh, I get it" Draco answered maliciously "Bet she comes real cheap, eh Potter"

Harry turned on him, hair flicking with excess magic "Say that again, Malfoy" he growled

"Oooh, not very friendly" said Draco as he retreated a couple of steps

Ginny stepped in front of Harry "Harry doesn't need to pay anyone for their company, unlike you" she sneered "I hope you're not paying for that cow Pansy by the pound"

"Still letting your girlfriend fight your battles, I see" Draco said, not even looking at her. He strolled off with a smirk on his face.

Harry wanted to go after him, but Ginny blocked him "Forget about him, Harry" she said "I'd rather go back to dancing"

"Sure, Gin" Harry replied, half-heartedly. And as the song ended, he said "Do you think we could sit out a couple?"

"I guess so" Ginny replied, silently cursing Draco "Why don't you look for Ron or Hermione and I'll get us some butterbeer"

Harry squeezed her hand in thanks. He found Ron sitting and sulking "Something wrong, mate?" he asked. Ron just thrust out his chin. Harry turned to see Hermione and Viktor dancing. As the song ended, she got close to him, then after a minute she pointed at where Harry and Ron were.

"This Ball is amazing!" Hermione exclaimed as she sat, slightly winded.

"Having fun with Vicky, are you?" asked Ron nastily

Hermione looked like he'd struck her "What is wrong with you?" she asked.

"Your precious Vicky is competing against Harry! He just wants you to tell him Harry's plans!" Ron replied.

"Last time I checked, Ronald, you were the one with the Viktor poster and the Viktor doll!" she shot back harshly.

"He's the enemy, Hermione!!" Ron screamed, practically in her face.

Now Hermione's face was red from anger "Now you're just being stupid!!" she screamed, matching his volume.

"Are you even gonna dance with me once?" an angry Parvati asked at that moment.

Ron ignored Parvati and said "You agree with me, don't you Harry?" Parvati stomped away.

"To be honest Ron, I don't see anything wrong." Harry replied "I mean. Fleur came with Roger Davies and he goes here."

"And you asked Fleur!" Hermione exclaimed triumphantly "So, you've got no right to talk!!"

"Fine then" Ron snapped "Go and find Vicky then!"

Hermione threw up her hands in disgust "You ruined everything!!" she yelled "And don't call him that!!!" she stomped off and was quickly lost in the crowd.

Moments later Viktor and Ginny appeared, both carrying butterbeers "What happened?" she asked easily picking up her brother's anger.

“Ron and Hermione had a tiff” Harry replied.

Viktor directed an angry look at Ron “Which way did she go?” he asked

“Not a clue, mate” Ron shot back, nothing at all friendly in his tone.

Viktor looked like he was about to hit Ron, but Harry pointed, saying “She went that way. Probably the girls’ lavatory”

“That wasn’t very nice, Ron” Ginny scolded as she handed Harry his butterbeer.

Harry took a swig “Thanks Gin” he said “Look, you know what happens when they get into it”

“So what was it about?” she asked.

Ron just glared at her, so Harry answered “He thinks Hermione shouldn’t’ve come to the Ball with Viktor”

“Well you had plenty of opportunity to ask her” Ginny pointed out. Ron gave her a dirty look “Don’t even---” Ginny began, dangerously

The last thing Harry wanted was another fight, he put his butterbeer down and said “Ahh...Ginny how about we go and dance again.”

“Alright” she replied. They shared a couple of slow dances. Then Harry tried to skive off a fast one but Ginny pulled him back “Come on Harry!” she yelled over the loud music “You learned one!” Harry let himself be pulled back and half an hour later, they were breathing hard and sweaty.

“You kids are a great audience!” the Weird Sisters’ singer yelled “We’re just taking a little break! We’ll be back in ten!” Hogwarts shook under the force of the applause.

“Can we grab a couple of butterbeers and take a walk?” asked Harry

Ginny nodded “That sounds nice, Harry” she said

In the courtyard, they wandered aimlessly for a while “I---” they both began at the same time

“Go ahead, Harry” she said.

“I’ve been having a lot of fun with you tonight, Ginny” he said “I’m really glad to be here with you. I-I...that is...can we do it again?”

Ginny’s heart skipped a beat, or three, “A-a-are you as-asking me out?” she stammered. Her butterbeer crashed on the marble of the courtyard.

“Yeah” said Harry in an uncertain tone.

“Out, out?” Ginny asked “As in boyfriend/girlfriend out?”

“Is there another kind?” he asked, beginning to get impatient.

Ginny shrugged, there was a smile tugging at her lips “Not that I’ve heard of” she said “Big step that...walking to class holding hands and all”

“Yeah, too bad we don’t have any classes together” Harry replied. His pulse doubled when she put her hand in his. “Kissing seems important, too” he said ‘Must be the butterbeer’ “Wonder how you keep from banging your noses together”

Ginny giggled, feeling the blood flow into her cheeks “What I can’t figure is how you kiss and breathe at the same time”

“Maybe its like Wood says” said Harry, letting his her hand run up Ginny’s arm.

Her face went all bug-eyed “Trust a boy to think of Quidditch at a time like this” she grumbled

“I was thinking of his three favorite words” Harry said (he lifted her chin with a finger) “Practice” (he stroked her cheek) “Practice” (he

leaned in until they were an inch apart) "Practice" (and their lips connected).

One minute and fourteen seconds later, Ginny knew because she counted, THE KISS ended "Definitely... need to... work on that... breathing thing" she said, huskily.

"More practice?" Harry suggested with a glint in his eyes. He heard harsh whispers but ignored them in favor of more practice.

"Not even enough sense to hide your indiscretions, Potter" Snape snarled "Ten points from Gryffindor! And Weasley, I thought you were smarter than to associate yourself with our resident hero. Ten points from you as well! Back to the Hall or I'll have you both in detention...on different days!"

"Yes Professor" Harry said, contentedly. Then, after Snape sent to pursue "FAWCETT!!" and "STEBBINS!!" Harry commented "Best ten points I ever lost."

Ginny snorted in amusement "Yeah! I'm real broke up about the whole thing. Shall we, Mr. Hero!" she offered her arm.

"Sure" replied Harry "Lead the way" A few minutes later, Harry was waiting near the girls' lavatory for Ginny when someone crashed into him.

A disheveled Susan Bones tried to scramble away but something in their robes had gotten tangled "Snape's after me!" she whispered frantically.

"Just follow my lead" Harry replied.

Susan nodded and about ten seconds later Ginny came out and Snape appeared simultaneously. "I'll have you in detention for a month for running like that, Bones" Snape snarled.

"Susan wasn't running, Professor" Harry said, innocently "We were talking while I was waiting for Ginny when someone crashed into us and ran into the Hall"

As Snape eyed them his upper lip curled “Who might that have been, Potter?” he asked suspiciously.

“It all happened so fast, I’m not sure, sir” Harry replied “it might’ve been Millicent Bulstrode”

“And what do you have to say, Miss Bones?” asked Snape

Susan gulped nervously “Sorry...er...Professor, I wasn’t looking...ahh...when it happened”

“I see” he replied, he turned and headed back to the courtyard.

“Excuse me Professor!” Harry called “But Millicent went that way!” Snape ignored him.

Susan heaved a big sigh “Thank you so much, Harry” she said “I can’t believe that worked.”

“No big deal. He already caught us earlier” replied Harry.

Susan giggled “I see” She tried to leave, but their robes were still tangled. Susan giggled even more as they freed themselves “Gotta go find Justin, thanks again Harry” she said, waving as she departed.

“Who was that?” asked Ginny with a hint of jealousy.

“Susan Bones” Harry answered “she’s in Hufflepuff. She made the mistake of sitting next to Ron in First Year Potions. Snape gets her for almost as many points as me”

After the Ball ended, Cedric called out “Harry! Wait up!” He ran over leaving a put-out looking Cho at the end of the hallway.

“Yeah Cedric” he replied

“Listen, I didn’t really thank you for the tip about the dragons” the Hufflepuff boy said.

Harry shrugged “No big deal”

“But it was...er listen...someone gave me a tip, too. Umm...does your egg wail?” Cedric asked.

Ginny giggled “Oh yeah! Broke some windows in the common room”

“Right” Cedric acknowledged, distractedly “Well...take a bath, okay?”

Both Harry and Ginny just stared at him

“Tell you what” Cedric said “use the prefects; bathroom. Fourth door to the left of the statue of Boris the Bewildered on the fifth floor. Password’s pine fresh. Gotta go --- want to say good night”

Goblet of Fire – page 431

“Are all Hufflepuffs weird?” asked Ginny.

Harry shrugged and said “Well Susan was trying to keep out of trouble. As for Diggory, maybe he doesn’t like the fact that I asked Cho”

“Are you gonna do what he said?” asked Ginny.

Shrugging again, Harry replied “Eh...dunno...I’ll think about it tomorrow. Right now---I’d kinda like to---ahhh---practice some more”

“It’d be safer if we went back to the Common Room” said Ginny, her eyes slightly downcast and a blush coloring her cheeks.

“Lets go, then” Harry replied, excitedly.

Unfortunately for their plans, the Gryffindor Common Room was the scene of a screaming match between Ron and Hermione “---didn’t like it, then you know what you should have done, don’t you!?” she screamed

“NO!” Ron yelled back “But I’m sure you’ll tell me!!!”



“Next time there's a ball, ask me before someone else does, and not as a last resort!!!”

Goblet of Fire – page 432

“Bloody nutter” Ron complained “Oi! Harry, you ready for bed?”

Harry hesitated “Ahh...I guess...I'll...ummm...be up. I just want to say goodnight to Ginny.” he said

“Alright” said Ron, begrudgingly, going up to the boys' dormitory.

## Two Scoops of Rita

Harry's first class after Christmas was Care of Magical Creatures. It went bad almost immediately. First off, no Hagrid and the only explanation his replacement offered was "He's indisposed" Professor Grubbly-Plank made Harry think of Professor Snape.

The best thing about the whole class was that Harry got to show up the old bit...er...witch when she ordered all the boys away from the unicorn "He seems friendly enough to me, Professor" Harry said, when the creature approached him. He had to settle for just annoying the Professor, though. He didn't get any points. Worse, for Harry, were the constant superior looks that Draco Malfoy was giving him throughout the class.

As the girls moved away with Professor Grubbly-Plank, Draco smirked and pulled out a page from the Daily Prophet. "This little article explains where the big, ugly oaf went" he said with a smirk "He ran away" Several Slytherins laughed along with him.

"Gimme that, Malfoy" Harry growled, snatching the article from him.

Draco drew himself up proudly and said "If I may quote one prominent student from that article. My friend, Vincent Crabbe got bit by a Flobberworm and I was attacked by a hippogriff"

"All this is garbage and you know it, Malfoy!" Ron snarled. He snatched the article out of Harry's hands, ripped it, balled it up and threw it at Draco.

Surprisingly, Draco's only response was amused laughter "Oh don't worry Weasel" he chortled "There's an even better one about Potter's antics at the Ball. But we'll see that at lunch when the mail comes in. Fortunately, my father is well connected enough that he was able to make sure an owl rushed a copy to me this morning"

The return of Professor Grubbly-Plank with the female students ended further discussion as she began lecturing "Now, the unicorn species name is..."

Harry could barely pay attention to the lecture. He wanted to slap that smirk off Draco's face so badly.

The class bell rang and everyone jumped up to leave. But Professor Grubbly-Plank stopped them with homework "A roll of parchment on the unicorn, please. Due by Friday. Now you may go" she said.

"Wasn't that the most fascinating lecture?" Hermione said as they were walking back to the castle.

Harry ignored her question "Rita found out about Hagrid being part giant" he said

"What? How?" asked Hermione "Do you suppose she overheard him telling Madame Maxine?"

Ron shook his head and said "No way, that happened in the garden. I would've seen her"

"Outta my way!" Parvati snapped, pushing past Ron.

"What's her bloody problem?" asked Ron angrily.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him and said "Maybe the way you treated her at the Ball"

"She disappeared on me" countered Ron.

"You ignored her --- " Hermione began.

--Here comes another one--Harry thought

But she stopped as they entered the Hall.

Draco looked positively gleeful. He was sitting casually on the end of the Slytherin table. He had clearly just been waiting for Harry to arrive. There were copies of the Daily Prophet all over the place "Tsk, tsk Potter. Bit of a heartbreaker, weren't you?" he said

"What are you going on about, Malfoy?" asked Hermione.

“Guess you’re not so bad after all, Granger” Draco replied “See, the great Miss Skeeter even apologized to you. Here you go, Potter, consider it a Christmas gift. Sorry it’s late.” Then he tossed the paper at Harry.

Harry was immediately offended by the title. The letters threw sparks into the air to make sure they drew maximum attention.

## HARRY POTTER – THE PLAYBOY WHO LIVED

By Rita Skeeter

In the interest of journalistic accuracy, I your humble reporter, must announce that I have possibly made an error. My previous column reported that Hermione Granger, long time companion of Harry Potter, appeared to be playing with the affections of our tragic hero.

Last night, as I am sure many parents are aware, Hogwarts played host to a Yule Ball in honor of the TriWizard Tournament. The Great Hall was magnificently decorated in a lovely winter theme. Most students were very smartly attired for the occasion. Though, without naming names, I mention one outrageous outfit that looked as if Merlin himself was too young to know when it was created. At any rate I digress.

Miss Granger appeared, not on Harry Potter’s arm, as many including myself might have expected. Rather, she spent the evening in the company of Viktor Krum, the Durmstrang champion. I find myself torn about this. As a graduate of Hogwarts, I feel rather betrayed by Miss Granger’s choice of escorts. But as a woman, I say WAY TO GO!! A woman scorned and all that.

Which brings me to Harry and his activities that night. His date, one Virginia Weasley, age 11, was far less attractive than Miss Granger would’ve been. And don’t even get me started on the colors of her dress. To this reporter, it is apparent she was selected for her naiveté. The young girl quickly fell victim to the legendary Potter charm that he appears to have inherited directly from James, as any witch in her mid 30s can attest to. And my grandmother acknowledged a brief

liason with Harry's grandfather. After their quite amorous tour of a very secluded part of the courtyard, for which they were disciplined, Harry was seen to be groping Susan Bones, niece of Amelia a member of the Wizengamot. Susan is an older girl and considerably more developed than poor little Virginia. Harry was also reported to have been in intimate company with two other girls, although I was not able to confirm these reports.

Either Ginny was a faster reader, or she had gotten to the article before Harry had. Because, just as he was finishing, she ran past with a tear streaked face. At that same moment, a yell of "I'm gonna ram that bitch's wand up her arse!!" came from the Hufflepuff table.

"Ten points for your language, Miss Bones!" Professor Sprout exclaimed "And an additional ten for threatening violence!"

Draco and his buddies just laughed. In fact, Draco almost rolled off the table "Don't know how this day could get better!!" he said through his laughter.

"Malfoy!" Harry snarled, about to give in to a desire to throw him across the Hall.

Hermione stopped him "Harry! Go after Ginny!" she said.

"Right" he said. Ginny's trail was easy to follow. It was a straight line for the Gryffindor Common Room. He was close enough to hear the sound of the Fat Lady's picture slam shut. He reached it and impatiently yelled the password.

"No reason to be rude, young man" she replied "Try again"

"Open the bloody door" Harry growled, his fists clenched. The Fat Lady made him apologize twice and repeat the password before finally opening. He looked around and quickly spotted Ginny sitting near the fireplace, sobbing. "Gin" he said as he gently touched her shoulder.

Ginny pulled away "I actually thought you liked me" she sobbed

"I do" said Harry "Last night was the happiest night of my---" he reached out.

"Then how could you?!" asked Ginny and then she ran for the stairs yelling "I HATE YOU HARRY POTTER!!!!"

Harry had an absolutely devastated look on his face when Hermione and Ron came in.

"My God, Harry what happened?" asked Hermione as she wiped the tears from his cheeks.

"She hates me" replied Harry in a strange, far away tone.

"Not a chance, mate" Ron said cheerfully "My sister's had a thing for you forever"

Turning a dazed look at Ron, he asked "Then why would she say it?"

"Wait here" Hermione said "I'll go talk to her, okay" Harry shrugged.

She was hardly out of sight when Harry said "C'mon Ron, we'll be late for Potions"

"Er...Harry...we still got twenty minutes of lunch left" replied Ron.

When Hermione came down with Ginny in tow the first thing she asked was "Ron where's Harry?"

"Ginny, you don't really hate Harry, do you?" Ron asked.

Ginny threw herself at him "Ohh noooo Ron, never" she cried "I was just so upset over that article. And well, Harry just came in before I had a chance to sort through it. I was so horrible to him. I just wanna fix this as fast as possible. Where is he?"

"Well, you saw what he was like, Hermione" said Ron. She nodded so he continued "Well, he got even...ahh...weirder"

Hermione shook her head impatiently "What does that have to do with Harry not being here?" she demanded.

"That's the thing" Ron answered "After you left, he started talking about being late for Potions and left"

"We'll talk to Harry" Hermione said.

Ron rubbed her back, saying "Everything will be fine, I promise"

"Thanks Ron" said Ginny "You too Hermione. Tell him how sorry I am"

"You'll be kissing again in no time" Hermione said

Ron gave her a dirty look and grumbled "Too much information"

"Come on Ron" said Hermione "We don't want to be late. And Ginny has Defense and History" They left at a brisk pace. Despite that, they arrived a minute late.

"How nice of you to join us" Professor Snape sneered "I'll have five points from you Weasley, and you as well Granger. Now take your seats!" Millicent Bolstrode arrived even later, but he continued his lecture "...Today's potion is the Polyjuice Potion. Does anyone know the ingred---" Hermione's hand shot straight up "That is, other than the know-it-all"

Harry put his hand up and rattled off the correct formula.

"Obviously copying off Miss Granger. Five points from Gryffindor, Potter" said Snape.

Harry muttered something and Ron snickered. Hermione nudged him

"Care to share your joke with the rest of the class, Potter?" asked Snape.

Harry shrugged "Nothing's good enough for you, is it?" he asked angrily.

“Silence Potter!” Snape ordered “Or I’ll have you in detention”

Harry laughed sarcastically “Nothing new there, either” Every face in the room focused on Harry.

“How dare you?! You arrogant little...” Snape was furious.

Harry slammed his fist on the desk “You’ve been saying that about me since day one!” he shot back “You don’t know me, Snivellus!”

“EVERYONE OUT!!” Snape roared “EXCEPT FOR POTTER!!”

By dinner time, the story was all over the school. But neither Snape nor Harry were present. Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall were missing as well. The Gryffindor table was sharply divided.

“We’re gonna be in so deep we’ll never get out of the hole” said Seamus resentfully.

Several upperclassmen agreed with him, but one Seventh Year girl didn’t “Snape’s been doing this for years” she said “About time someone gave him an earful” Ron cheered for her.

“A month ago you woulda been agreeing with me, Weasley” Seamus pointed out.

Ron snarled at him “Shut up, Finnegan”

“I feel like this is all my fault” said Ginny, she was on the verge of tears.

“Partially, yeah” Hermione replied. Ginny started sobbing

Ron glared at her “Nice job Hermione!” he snapped.

“Sorry” Hermione said sheepishly.

Nothing was resolved by the time dinner ended. Later, as curfew approached, everyone went to bed except for Ron, Ginny and



Hermione. When Harry finally appeared it was almost eleven. Ginny was asleep, leaning on Ron.

“Hi Hermione, hi Ron” he said tiredly

Instantly rushing to his side, Hermione fussed over him “Oh Harry, we were so worried” she said “I can’t believe what you said to Professor Snape”

“Long overdue, just like what’s-her-name said” said Ron.

Hermione frowned and asked “Are you in any trouble?”

“Can we talk about it tomorrow?” he asked, yawning

“I guess” Hermione replied, hesitantly “Uhh...Harry...Gin’s been waiting, too. She’s really worried. Can you talk to her? Please?”

Harry shrugged “I dunno” he said “I spent most of the day with someone who hates me. I really can’t handle any more.”

“WHA!” Ginny exclaimed, suddenly, in response to Ron poking her in the side.

Harry turned away, saying “I’m going to bed”

“No! Wait Harry!” she yelled. She scrambled off the bed and landed on the floor with a thump “Sonufa---”

“You said you hated me” said Harry, still looking away.

“And I’m so sorry” Ginny sobbed “I wish I could somehow un-say it. Please look at me”

Harry turned, there was hurt plainly written in his expression “Not one thing in that article was true” he said “You saw what happened with Susan Bones. Besides Rita didn’t even get your age right”

“Or my name” Ginny replied with a faint laugh.

"I didn't notice" said Harry, some of his pained expression fading.

Ginny took a step closer to him "It's not important" she said "I'm really sorry about what happened. Can we...I dunno...forget it ever happened?"

"I'd like to" said Harry. Ginny tried to hug him, but he backed away shaking his head. "I need to think" he said "A lot's happened today, and I really need some sleep. I'll...uhh...talk to you later" This time he did leave.

Ginny felt her heart break as he left. She let herself fall into a chair "He's not gonna forgive me, is he?" she sobbed "I can't believe I did that"

The next day was Friday, Thank Merlin! Gryffindor sang Harry's praises. They hadn't lost any of the expected massive points they'd expected to and were still in the thick of the Cup race. Even better, everyone was talking about how Professor Snape didn't seem to be targeting them. At least not as blatantly. The entire school was buzzing with rumors. But Harry wasn't talking, not meaning he was just not saying anything about the argument. Other than to answer a question in class, and only when he was called on, he hadn't said a word all day.

"Potter must be too good to join us" Seamus commented at dinner.

Hermione and Ginny had to keep Ron in his seat "Why don't you sit with Malfoy" he suggested, coldly.

No one saw Harry that night, either. So it was a big surprise when he appeared at breakfast, smiling. "Hey, Seamus, what happened to your hair?" he asked jovially.

"Sod off, Potter!" snapped Seamus as he tried to hide his suddenly blond hair.

Harry shrugged and grabbed a piece of toast "Morning Ron, 'Mione" he greeted.

“Have a seat, mate” Ron offered as he slid to make room between him and Hermione.

Shaking his head, Harry replied “No thanks, I’ll talk to you guys a little later, OK”

“Are you OK, Harry?” Hermione asked “You’ve hardly talked to anyone since---”

Harry interrupted her saying “Ask me again later” Then he headed for where Ginny was sitting with her dorm mates. He tapped her on the shoulder and said “Hi”

## The Second Task

"Hiya Harry" said Ginny. She too hadn't slept well the last couple of days, bags and dark circles had formed under her eyes. She felt terribly guilty for lashing out at Harry. And it had been very hard for her to watch as he isolated himself. "Would you like to join us?" she asked hopefully.

Harry ran a hand through his hair before answering "Ahh...no...I'd kind of like to speak to you alone." Several of Ginny's dormmates frowned at him "No offense" he continued "Too many people here."

"Don't do it!" one of the girls said harshly.

Ginny frowned at her and stood up "I'm done breakfast, I think" she said. They left the Castle and walked a good distance, not wanting to be overheard.

"Sorry about the way I've been the----" Harry started to apologize

Ginny interrupted "You have nothing to apologize for, Harry. I was furious at that article, then people started teasing me and I just lost it."

"And you don't hate me?" asked Harry

Ginny shook her head almost violently "NO WAY!" she said "I hate that article! I hate Rita Skeeter! And I hate those idiots that were saying nasty things about you the other day!"

"That works for me" Harry said "Y'know, I kind of like it when you get a fired up."

Ginny blushed quite thoroughly "Does that mean we're...I'm mean...D-do you forgive me?" she asked.

"Yeah" he said softly "Just promise me you'll talk to me before you believe what you read in the paper"

Smiling shyly, she said "I can do that" Then, suddenly feeling rather daring, she put her arms around his neck. "This probably wouldn't happened if we had gotten more time to know each other"

"Well, there's a Hogmeade weekend just after the second task" he said, putting his hands on her waist.

Ginny pouted "I was hoping for something a bit sooner than that"

"Oh were you?" asked Harry playfully. Ginny blushed and made to pull away. But Harry tightened his grip on her waist. His lips were on hers and she melted very eagerly into his embrace. And haltingly, they found their way into their first deep kiss.

Ginny broke the kiss, panting  
"Still...need...to...work...on...that...breth...er...breathing thing"

"Need more practice" Harry said with a gleam in his eyes. He pulled her back and kissed her again. That was when a very accurate snowball hit both their noses. "ARRRGG!!!" Harry roared holding his nose.

Ginny recovered slightly faster and spotted their attackers "FRED AND GEORGE WEASLEY!!!" she howled and charged after them. Harry, vision still blurry, followed the sound of Ginny's voice.

Fred and George linked arms and merrily pranced off singing

"Harry and Ginny...out in the cold---"

"K...I...S...S...I...N...G!!!"

"First comes love!!!"

"Then comes marriage!!!"

"Then comes...TWO FACES FULL OF SNOW!!!"

Still in hot pursuit, Ginny scooped up a handful of snow, packed it and heaved it toward her brothers. It fell well short of the targets

“You throw like a girl!!” George taunted.

Ginny stopped and snarled at them “Oh yeah” then she pointed her wand at the snow on the ground. A small snowball formed in mid air and she banished it toward the twins. It winged Fred and she laughed evilly.

“Wha’d’you do?” Harry asked, breathlessly.

She grinned at him and explained “A Summoning Spell and then a Banishing Spell”

“Brilliant!” Harry exclaimed “Bet we can make a huge one if we work together”

Ginny nodded “OK, but hurry. Before they get in the castle” Between them, they created a two foot snowball. “FIRE!!” she bellowed.

Oddly, the twins had stopped right at the castle gate. They just watched it lazily. Then when it vanished, they started laughing.

“Where’d it go?” Ginny complained when she and Harry got there.

Fred chuckled “We must admit. That was a good try”

“You shoulda been splattered all over the wall” Harry grumbled.

George shook his head, greatly amused “Poor ickle Harrykins” he laughed “You really should listen to Granger once in a while”

“Well spotted you handsome devil” Fred added “Hogwarts: A History does make a good read”

“What does that have to do with anything?” asked Harry.

“It’s simple, really---” Fred began

George interrupted him “Ah, your pardon good sir. But if we just hand them the answer, will they really learn anything?”

“Quite true, a clue perhaps, then?” Fred suggested.

George nodded and waved his wand at Harry, who was quickly down to t-shirt and jeans.

“Quite enough oh twin of mine” Fred advised “Mustn’t corrupt the baby sister too much”

“Hey!” Ginny yelled indignantly. However she was drowned out by Harry, who was pushed some thirty feet away

“Its ruddy freezing!!!” he bellowed from the distance

George waved him in “Well what are you doing out there?” he asked.

Harry reached them, teeth clicking and rubbing his arms “What the b-b-b-bloody h-h-h-ell you do that for?” he asked. Ginny started rubbing his arms and Harry found he didn’t mind so much.

“So, how does it feel here?” Fred asked.

“Warm” Harry observed.

George gave a fake cheer “Give the boy a prize!” he said

“After he gets his arms out of our sister’s robes” commented Fred.

“I rather like the prize I have” said Harry, moving closer to Ginny.

The twins glared at him “Its lunch time” they said together.

“Well done Harry” Ginny laughed as the twins left.

Harry blushed slightly at the praise, or was it Ginny’s closeness “Thanks” he replied “I still think some payback is needed”

“We need to ask Hermione about this” she put in.

Harry pouted at her and said “I’m still a little chilly”

“HAHA!” Ginny laughed “The Boy-Who-Lived is a wimp!!”

He poked her in the ribs and said “Noooo, I’d just rather stay like this, is all”

“Too bad my stomach has other ideas” Ginny commented when it rumbled.

On the way to the Great Hall, someone shoved him “Outta the way, Potter!” the person said

“Watch where you’re going, Malfoy!” Ginny exclaimed, assuming the obvious. But it wasn’t Harry’s favorite nemesis. “Who was that?” she asked.

Harry gave a frustrated sigh and replied “Justin”

“Justin who?” she asked

“Finch-Fletchley”

Ginny looked shocked “From Hufflepuff!?!”

“Yeah” Harry replied “Swallowed that Skeeter article, every word. Susan told me.”

“When did you talk to her?” asked Ginny

Harry pulled her aside and said “Maybe I should tell you this now. Never know when Rita will strike again. You know I wasn’t at dinner last night?” Ginny nodded so he continued “Well, I was up in the owlery when she came in. She was crying so I asked her what was wrong. She told me that right after that paper went around, Justin walked out of the Great Hall. Then during Care of Magical Creatures he gave her nasty looks and after class he started screaming at her. He called her names and...er...well...” he trailed off embarrassed.

“What Harry?” she asked.



He scratched the back of his neck, then muttered "Hesaidshewouldlemmegropeherallshewants"

It took Ginny a moment to decipher what he said "Oh he did, did he?" she said coolly "A real sweetheart ain't he?"

"Got that right" said Harry, relieved that Ginny wasn't angry at him. He didn't want any more arguments.

They went to the Gryffindor table, holding hands which Hermione instantly saw "So! Have a seat. Tell us all about it." She requested.

"Yeah, do tell, mate" Ron added, snickering "Notice you still got a red nose"

Harry gave him a dirty look and said "Piss off, Ron"

"Just ignore him" Hermione advised "He's just glad Fred and George tormented you"

Ginny's eyes narrowed "Oh is he?" she asked harshly "We have some questions to ask about that, and no brothers are invited"

"Hey! Its our job" Ron protested "Besides, as blokes go, Harry's not too bad. I just don't need to see any...ahh"

"PDAs?" asked Hermione as a possibility. Both Harry and Ron gave blank looks "A little clueless aren't they?" she giggled.

Ginny nodded "Just a little bit. She means this, brother dear" she said. Then she kissed Harry.

"EEWWW!" Ron groaned, covering his eyes "Help! I'm blind" Ron looked very put out as they laughed at him.

Hermione decided to show him a little mercy, saying "So, ummm Harry, what happened with Professor Snape. You know you could've gotten in a lot of trouble"

“I don’t get a Hogsmeade trip until after the second task” Harry grumbled.

“It could have been a lot worse” Hermione replied.

Harry shrugged and said “Its about time he got some of his own medicine. Oh, and that reminds me. I have a secret that’s gonna drive the twin twits nuts.”

“What does that have to do with Professor Snape?” Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head “Sorry, not in public.”

The following Friday night, the Sixth Year Boys Dormitory was infiltrated. Hermione, against her better judgment, provided cooling charms for two massive loads of snow. Harry and Ron levitated the snow into the room, while Ginny spell-o-taped all nine boys’ wands to the wall so they couldn’t just summon them. Ginny and Hermione left through the window by broom and, after pinning a note to Fred’s bunk, Harry covered Ron and himself with his Invisibility Cloak and then they cancelled the levitation spells allowing about fifty pounds of snow to fall on each of the twins. They silently enjoyed the screams then slipped away to their dorm.

“Who would dare!?” George yelled indignantly as he struggled to get free.

Fred found the note first “It appears he left a calling card”

Dear Twits,

Ooops, sorry, that’s Twins.

It snowed last night, so we thought you might like some.

Regards,

Prongs Jr. and Associates

At breakfast, Fred and George appeared, properly dressed and apparently un-pranked. But, they were carefully studying the entire school.

“Good morning lil bro” George said to Ron, falsely cheerful. They had agreed that Ron was a possible suspect.

Ron was busy trying to chew part of a roll and get some bacon into his mouth at the same time “Gdmngng” came the muffled reply.

“Ronald don’t talk with your mouth full” Hermione scolded, looking away from the table “It’s disgusting”

Fred targeted Harry and Ginny “Budge over, there Harry. I need to talk to the little one” he said, forcing himself between them.

“Stuff yourself” said Ginny grumpily.

Fred patted her on the back “Now, now, that’s no way to talk to your elders” he said. “So, do anything interesting last night, sis?”

“Not really” she replied innocently “How’bout you?”

Fred didn’t answer, instead he turned to Harry “So, oh thief of our dear sister’s heart----”

“And lips” Harry interrupted, causing Ginny to blush

Fred made a disgusted face “Too much information, mate” he said “Anyway, where were you, oh between three and four this morning?”

“Sleeping” Harry replied “Do you have any idea how hard it is to fall asleep with Ron snoring?”

Fred couldn’t help laughing at that. The twins went to sit with Lee Jordan, whispering to themselves about possible suspects.

“So what are we going to do today, oh thief of my lips?” Ginny asked as she slid next to Harry, allowing their legs to touch.

This time Harry blushed “Er, sorry about that. Didn’t mean to---”

“You can steal my lips any time, Harry” she said.

Over the next few weeks, Harry and Ginny grew closer. The Weasley boys were stumped. Fred and George had long spread the word that anyone dating Ginny would be ‘Asking For It’ But, in all the time Harry had spent at the Burrow, he had never shown any interest in Ginny. So, they just didn’t think it was necessary. Worse, even though he wasn’t allowed to go to Hogsmeade, Harry had somehow managed to get her a Valentine’s Day gift. Hermione denied any involvement, even when threatened with Veratiserum.

“I have more than four friends” Harry had answered when they asked about it. Then they started guessing, and after running through a number of Gryffindors, Harry asked “What makes you think it was a Gryffindor?”

That about drove Fred and George crazy. But the worst happened shortly after. They were having lunch when Pig arrived with a note from their parents saying how happy they were. George wrapped his arms around his belly looking sick and Fred banged his head on his plate.

“What’s got them all goofy?” Lee Jordan asked

Ginny handed the letter to Harry and replied “Dunno. Just my parents asking if they could come to the Third Task”

“Whose owl is that?” asked Ron, when a brown one arrived with a note for Harry.

He almost said Padfoot, but it would’ve been a dead giveaway to Fred and George, so he replied “Professor Lupin...he ahhh wants to meet in Hogsmeade. When is it again?”

“I thought it was just you and me.” Ginny said, disappointed.

Harry found himself stuck in another problem. So he could torment the twins, he explained about the makers of the Marauders’ Map. And

who Prongs was, but not the other three “Ahh...could we take a walk?” he asked

“Don’t you two get enough?” Fred said teasingly.

Harry smirked at him “Just following up on another lead”

“Wait for us!” George exclaimed

Harry shook his head “Can’t, my source doesn’t want to reveal who they are. And, don’t forget, I’ll know if you’re following us”

“You’re really enjoying this, aren’t you?” Ginny asked mischievously.

Harry gave her a smirk and a wink. Then after they got outside he said “Right, we’re not meeting Professor Lupin. Ron and Hermione both recognized who it was from, but I couldn’t say it in the Hall. I’m going to trust you with a big secret. The names of the Marauders are all nicknames. Prongs was my Dad, you know” Ginny nodded “I also know who the other three are and you already met two of them”

“Who? When? Where?!” Ginny rambled in surprise. Harry laughed “Stop making fun” she grumbled swatting him on the chest.

He snickered some more, then said “OK, sorry. Anyway, Moony is Professor Lupin”

“Oohh! A werewolf, got it” she said, snapping her fingers.

“Well aren’t you the smart one” Harry teased, earning himself another swat. He kissed her nose before continuing, “And the other one you know is Wormtail”

Ginny frowned in confusion “Huh?”

“Percy named him Scabbers” he replied

Ginny shivered in disgust “Oh, gross! Yuck!! EWWW!!” she complained “Never much cared for that rat. But he’s been crawling around the Burrow forever! An animagus?”

"Yep" Harry confirmed "His real name is Peter Pettigrew"

"But he was killed by---" said Ginny

Harry cut her off, saying "Sirius Black?" Ginny just nodded "No" he continued "Pettigrew killed all those Muggles, then he blasted off his own finger and vanished into the sewer, leaving Sirius to take the blame. Sirius is innocent. He's also Padfoot"

"A-and y-y-you're...I m-m-mean that l-letter was f-fr-from Sirius Black?" she asked, hesitantly. Harry nodded "And you're meeting him in Hogsmeade?"

Harry nodded again and replied "Yeah. Do you want to meet the only wizard ever to escape Azkaban?"

"Do I get to tell the twins I've met the Marauders?" asked Ginny with a grin

Harry laughed "Sure, but just not yet. I figure we can keep them on the hook until we're on the train home"

"That's cruel Harry!" she giggled "They've been trying to find out for years!"

Harry just raised his eyebrows and said "Soooo?"

"You're sure its safe?" she asked cautiously.

Two days later, on the night before the Second Task was to take place, Harry still only knew that he needed to find some way to breathe under water for an hour. One by one, his friends had fallen asleep. First Ron, a little before eleven. Ginny drifted off a little before 11:30. Hermione got up, saying she needed to use the loo, but she never came back. Harry assumed she went to bed.

Someone poked him. Harry fell over in his chair "WHA--!!" he screamed, blindly looking for his wand.

“Harry Potter must wake up, sir!” someone yelled.

He scrambled away and righted his glasses “Alright, Dobby, I’m awake!” he exclaimed

“The Task, Harry Potter, sir!” Dobby squeaked “The Task starts in ten minutes, Harry Potter, sir!!”

Harry gaped at the elf “T-t-ten min-minutes?” he stammered.

“You is supposed to be with the other champions at the lake, Harry Potter, sir!” Dobby announced.

Harry gave him a hopeless look “It’s too late, Dobby” he said miserably “I don’t know how to---”

“Dobby knows, sir! Dobby can helps Harry Potter!” Dobby replied excitedly. “Dobby hases the answer! Harry Potter must save his Wheezy from the merpeople!”

Harry was still groggy from being woken up “Huh? Whazzat?”

“Wheezy, who giving Dobby his sweater” the elf exclaimed.

Harry was suddenly fully awake “They’ve got RON!?!” he exclaimed.

“Yes sir, Harry Potter’s thing sir would miss most!” Dobby jumped and bounced

Harry thought about the clue in the egg and his stomach clenched painfully “What should I do, Dobby?” he asked, full of panic.

“Eat this, sir” Dobby answered.

Harry looked at the quivering, slimy ball and his stomach heaved “What is it?”

“Gillyweed sir” Dobby replied “Harry Potter will breathe under water”

“Urrhh, thanks Dobby” Harry said uncertainly holding out his hand.

Dobby squealed happily "Harry Potter is thanking Dobby! Harry Potter is a great wizard to shake poor miserable Dobby's hand! Dobby must go back to the kitchen before Dobby is missed! Dobby hopes you is finding yous Wheezy!"

"About time you got here!" Percy snapped when Harry got to the lake.

Ginny growled at him "Ron could be in danger and all you're worried about is your precious schedule!"

"The... merpeople... have....him" Harry gasped, still out of breath from running.

Ginny grabbed his shoulders "But you can't Harry!" she exclaimed "We couldn't find a way for your to breathe down there!"

"Dobby did" he replied "This is gillyweed. Ask Hermione"

Ginny looked doubtfully at the slimy mass in Harry's hand and was about to say something, but she was cut off as Mr. Bagman announced "Something rather precious was stolen from each of our champions. They have precisely one hour to recover it! On the count of three, then! One ... Two ... THREE!!!"

"Wait, Harry!" said Ginny, she gave him a quick deep kiss.

With a bright smile, Harry stuffed the gillyweed in his mouth and charged into the lake. For a few moments of struggling to swim. The gillyweed worked its magic, he grew fins on his legs and arms and gills opened on the sides of his throat. Harry fought through a water demon and the grindylows. Just as he feared time was running out, someone spoke.

"A little lost, are you?"

Harry practically jumped out of his skin "Myrtle!" he exclaimed

Myrtle giggled at the pathetic bubble he produced "Try over there, good luck" she said pointing.



Harry followed Myrtle's direction and was greatly relieved to find that they were spot on. She not only pointed him to the city of the merpeople, but exactly to where they were holding the hostages. Harry saw Ron, Hermione, Cho and a little girl that he remembered as Fleur's sister all bound by seaweed. Their eyes were closed and their faces unmoving. 'A knife would be real useful' he thought. The mermen were making no attempt to stop him so he tried to get one of their spears.

"NO!" the merman exclaimed.

Harry struggled with him but the merman slapped him away with his tail. All the merpeople were laughing at him. Desperately aware that time must be running out, he looked around frantically and scooped up a rock. He proceeded to hack at Ron's bindings. When they broke he went after Hermione.

"Your friend only!" a merman said in a guttural voice "Take yours and leave"

Harry gestured at Hermione and yelled "She's my friend too!!" He found himself surrounded by spears.

The arrival of Cedric distracted them. Harry watched as he slashed at Cho's bindings with a knife and swam away. Then, moments later, a partially Transfigured Viktor arrived and began chomping at Hermione's bindings. Once they broke, Krum grabbed the loose ends in his shark-mouth and took off, dragging her along.

Harry broke free of the mermen and went after Fleur's sister. He pulled her free, grabbed Ron and launched himself for the surface.

Just cold, tired and waterlogged, recovery for the champions and their hostages was quick. The judges awarded points that put Cedric and Harry in a tie for first place. Everyone was cheering, with a few exceptions. Mr. Bagman was glaring at Karkaroff, making it obvious that he thought he shorted Harry on points. Krum looked decidedly surly as Hermione cheered for Harry. Ginny wasn't applauding, she

was too busy kissing Harry. Seamus had his arms crossed and was glaring angrily at them.

After the applause faded Mr. Bagman announced "The final task is scheduled for June 24. We will tell the champions the details one month prior, to allow them to prepare. Thank you."

Harry was a bundle of mixed emotions as they left the lake. He was proud to be in a tie for first. He was angry at the fact Ron had been in danger. He quite enjoyed walking with his arm around Ginny. He was very much beginning to dislike the whole tournament. He was very grateful to Dobby for his help.

## Meeting Padfoot

Yet another Rita Skeeter article came out the day after the Second Task. Pansy Parkinson took great pleasure in delivering it to Hermione as she came in to Potions Class “Can’t make up your mind, can you Granger?” she asked with a smirk. She tossed the paper at Hermione.

“You cow!” Hermione shot back.

Pansy laughed at the retort as she walked away “Turn to page four” she called over her shoulder.

“Appetite for famous wizards...” Hermione quoted from the article “Playing both off against each other ... Poor, young Virginia caught in the middle of a devious love triangle...”

She was interrupted by Ron who moaned “Ohh...I knew something like this could happen. Rita Skeeter is dangerous! She’s turned you into a scarlet woman!!”

“Tommyrot!” countered Hermione with a laugh “I thought she could do better than this drivel.”

Ron was red with equal parts of anger and embarrassment “But what happens when your parents read this?” he asked.

“My parents are Muggles, Ron” she replied “They couldn’t care less about Rita Skeeter or the Daily Prophet for that matter. Though, how could she have found out about ....?”

“What?” Ron asked “Have you been making love potions?”

Hermione gave him a withering look and snapped “That’s even denser for you, Ronald. No, how did she know about Viktor wanting me to come to Bulgaria with him?”

“Something wrong...” Ron mumbled “...foreigner...invite a girl like that”

Hermione looked down at her Potion and replied "It happened right after he pulled me from the lake. Its almost exactly what he said to me. How could she have known?"

"Is your social life more important than this class, Miss Granger?" asked Snape in a cold tone.

Hermione jumped "Yes Professor---er no, sir --- that is sorry Professor Snape" she stammered.

"Get back to work ten points from Gryffindor" he snarled. Then, as he passed, he snatch the paper off her desk and added "A further ten points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger, keep Potter up on his celebrity on your own time" He sneered at Harry and read the article for the class "Nothing to say, Mr. Potter?"

Harry barely kept from blowing up, but he didn't want to give Snape an excuse to take away his Hogsmeade trip. His teeth clenched and he replied "No, sir!"

"Well, why aren't you all working?" asked Snape of the class. Everyone suddenly made a great effort to look busy. Snape allowed the rest of the class to continue without further comment and dismissed them brusquely "Remain Potter!" he ordered. Ron and Hermione stood with him. Snape's lip curled "Granger, Weasley, I dismissed the class" he said "Close the door as you leave"

As the door shut, Harry turned back and said "Yes, sir"

"I know you've been breaking into my office, Potter!" growled Snape accusingly.

Shocked by the accusation, Harry shot back "I have not!"

"The only place you can get Boomslang Skin or Gillyweed at Hogwarts is from my private supply" Snape hissed

"What's...ahhh...Coosling?" Harry asked, deliberately mispronouncing what he knew was a Polyjuice Potion ingredient.

Snape's hand shot forward, his finger stopped half an inch from Harry's nose "Do not take that tone with me, or you will regret it!" he snapped.

"Are you threatening me, Professor?" asked Harry innocently.

They were interrupted by a knock on the door "This isn't over Potter! ENTER!" Snape yelled.

"We must talk, Severus" Karkaroff said as he swept into the room.

Snape turned to Harry and ordered "Out, now, Potter"

Harry was careful not to close the door completely as he walked out. He was able to hear some of their conversation, which was highly suspicious. Plus, he was able to see Karkaroff roll up his sleeve and show something to Snape, although he couldn't see what it was. Harry saw what he could only assume was fear on both Professors' faces, plus they were both in a near rage. Karkaroff started for the classroom door and Harry ran as fast as he could.

The next day was the Hogsmeade trip. Harry sighed in relief as he woke up, he had managed to avoid being kept in the castle. Even better, he'd survived a Rita article without getting into a fight with Ginny. This time, she was firmly behind him. The four of them each had swiped different bits of food to sneak to Sirius. Hermione had a loaf of bread in a bag with a weak warming charm. Ron had a large flask of pumpkin juice. Ginny and Harry had split a dozen chicken legs between them that were charmed to stay hot.

In the village, the couple was pulled in different directions. "They got new Keeper gear, Harry" said Ron in a wistful tone. Meanwhile, Hermione tried to steer them toward the bookstore.

"Look, guys, how about we split up for a bit" said Harry "We can all meet at Dervish and Banges, in an hour or so. Then we can look for my dog" Nobody moved for a minute so he said "See ya, Ron, see ya, Hermione"

Ron gave Harry an expectant look, but Hermione giggled “I think he’s trying to get rid of us, Ron”

“And no drinking the pumpkin juice, Ronald” Ginny scolded him playfully.

Ron frowned at his sister, but Hermione pulled him away “Come on Ron” she said “Let’s leave the lovebirds alone.”

“Pretty smart, that Hermione” Harry quipped, taking Ginny’s hand.

Ginny scraped her foot along the ground, not quite looking at Harry “So...ahh...what’cha wanna do?”

“How about a tour of the village?” Harry suggested

Ginny shook her head, frowning “Been there, done that” she replied “Fred and George showed me around the first couple of times and I came with my friends, too”

“Not on a date, though?” he asked.

“Of course not, Harry” Ginny answered, a little crossly “I never had a date before the Ball”

Harry wasn’t quite sure why she was angry “Err...sorry” he apologized “Its just that Dean told me he and Lavender have been on a...err...snogging tour”

“That sounds like fun” Ginny said, her frown changed instantly to a playful grin “Lead on, MacDuff, lead on”

Harry led her into the candy store, where he picked out a bag of cherry candies.

“That’ll be one Galleon and four Knuts please” the clerk said

Harry paid and thanked him, then he whispered to Ginny “Come’re” The couple snuck behind a set of stairs and started kissing.

“Outta my store!” an ancient witch yelled. She swatted Ginny on the rear with a broom.

Ginny yelped “Hey! Watch it with that!” earning another swat. Ginny ran, she felt the broom whiz past the back of her head.

“You too, young man!” she yelled, this time at Harry, she swung at Harry catching him in the stomach.

“Ooooff!!” he grunted. He dodged a second swing and half ran, half limped out the door. The other students in the store laughed at the scene. Outside, he thought she was crying “Gin, Are you ok?” he gasped

“Ruddy funniest thing!” she exclaimed in between gales of laughter “Oh, well, one shop down seventeen to go”

Harry laughed too, “Actually, according to Dean’s rules, it doesn’t count” he explained “The kiss has to last at least three minutes”

“Well, we can’t go back there today” Ginny pointed out

“Dean said that the ice cream shop is an easy one, with all the booths” suggested Harry.

Ginny giggled and teased “Coward”

“I’d rather you knock the breath outta me, than a broom” Harry shot back. He was quite pleased to see Ginny’s cheeks turn pink.

The ice cream shop also sold hot chocolate in the winter “Thanks Harry” said Ginny gratefully as she wrapped her hands around the large sized cup. They drank in a companionable silence, occasionally peaking over their cups at each other and smiling.

“Are you having fun, Ginny?” Harry asked after finishing his hot chocolate. Ginny nodded contentedly and leaned over to kiss him. Harry tried to meet her over the table, but they couldn’t quite connect, so Harry slipped around to her side. “So is this better?” he asked

Ginny wrapped her arms around his neck, brushed her lips along his cheek then brought their lips together. She didn't bother to point it out when the three minutes seemed to have passed.

They heard someone say "HEY! This doesn't count for two!" and a napkin bounced off Harry's head.

"Who did that?" asked Harry in an annoyed tone.

Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones were giggling at them "The Tour says three minutes in each shop" Hannah said.

"Yeah" Susan continued "You don't get two for one. Or in your case, three for one" Harry's eyes narrowed and he growled at her. Susan just laughed. The two Hufflepuffs got up from their table and slid into the booth across from the couple.

"We were having a...moment" said Ginny in an embarrassed tone.

"A moment?" Hannah asked "Was that ...a...moment? Suzy?"

Susan's whole body rippled with silent laughter "More like seven and a half" she replied "Please tell us how you do it"

"Cut it out" Ginny complained, blushing brightly.

"No offense" Susan apologized

Hannah stopped laughing, too and added "We were just teasing. Besides, we thought you'd want to---"

"Hi, Sue" said Ron, interrupting Hanna "We're looking for my sister and Harry Potter, have you---"

In response, Susan just waved her hand at the other side of the booth. Hermione snorted with amusement "Good thing Rita isn't around for this one" she said.

"What'd I do now?" Harry said in a suffering tone.



"I can see the headline" Hermione laughed "Harry and His Harem I could probably write the article for her---"

Harry growled at her "Shut it Hermione. Don't give her any ideas"

"Oh come on, Harry" she scoffed "Its not like she's here or anything"

Still annoyed, Harry scowled at her and said "Maybe she's got the place bugged"

"That's not possible. There's no way a bug would work in Hogsmeade. Too much magic around" she replied.

Ron gave her an odd look "There's all kinds of bugs around here" he said.

"Not insects Ronald" she replied, exasperatedly.

Hannah giggled at them and said "Cute, not very bright, but cute" Ron blushed and all the girls giggled except for Ginny who gave a disgusted look and turned away.

"Wha'd'ya mean?" Ron muttered. He didn't mind being called cute, but he didn't care much for the 'not very bright' part.

Susan rolled her eyes and said "Really Ron, you should take Muggle Studies. Bugs are an electric device that Muggles use to listen to other people's conversations"

"Err...Harry we need to get going" Ron said, changing the subject.

Looking confused, Harry asked "How come?"

"Remember the stray you wanted to feed" said Hermione

Harry blinked in surprise. He'd forgotten Sirius! "Oh" he said "OH! Right, yeah listen, Suzy, Hannah maybe we'll see ya later"

"Bye Harry" said Susan, shaking his hand

Hannah grabbed Ginny's and said "Yeah, hope you enjoy the tour"

Ginny blushed again, but this time she smiled.

"Byyyye Ronnnnn" both Hufflepuffs cooed.

Ron led the way out of the ice cream shop complaining "Girls are weird"

"Those two anyway" Ginny giggled "Imagine liking you, eeuwwwgghh!" her face crinkled up in an unpleasant expression.

"Don't do that to your face" Harry scolded in a parental tone "Hey Ron I don't know about Hannah but Susan isn't seeing anyone"

Ron's only reply was "Let's find Sirius"

Ginny gave Harry a light slap on the arm, but Hermione was the one who was displeased with Harry's comment. She looked away to hide a frown.

"His note said the alley is near the end of the village" said Harry.

Ginny pulled her hand from Harry's and ran. She froze when she saw the outline of a large black...something. It came out of the shadows and snarled at her.

"Rrrrr" it growled harshly with its teeth exposed. Then it started barking loudly "Ruff! Ruff! Arf!! Arf!! ARF! ARF! ARF!! ARF!! ARFARFARFARFARFARF!!!" It looked ready to pounce when Harry stepped in front of her.

"Stop Padfoot!" Harry said sharply "She's with me!"

The dog crouched and growled again, surprise and suspicion rippled across its frame. Ron and Hermione arrived and the dog relaxed slightly.

"You remember Ron and Hermione, don't you?" asked Harry in a soft voice.

Padfoot stood up straight and his tail started wagging. He sniffed at Harry's bag and the tail wagged more. He tugged lightly at Harry's pant-leg and trotted away. He stopped and looked back. The group took this to mean they should follow. After a ten minute hike, they reached a cave and the dog transformed into a man. Sirius was pale, his hair was matted and stringy, and he was very thin. His ragged clothes looked to be the same ones he wore when Harry met him. Harry didn't care, he hugged him anyway.

"Food!" Sirius wheezed. Harry handed him the bag of chicken and Sirius tore into it. He practically inhaled Harry's bag. "Thanks" he sighed "Got more I hope" In response, he was presented with pumpkin juice, another bag of chicken and a large loaf of bread. "Thanks, you three...ahh...sorry...four. Been mostly eating rats. So, who're you?"

"G-ginny Weasley" she replied, slightly nervous "Nice to m-meet you Mr. B-black"

He gave her an appraising glance, then said "Nice to meet you too. I take it you're Ron's sister?"

"Yes, sir" she replied.

He let out a barking laugh "Stop making me feel old" he said "My name is Sirius, or Padfoot, if you like. And while we're talking about age, you certainly don't look eleven."

"I'm not, I'm thirteen" replied Ginny sharply "And while we're at it my full name isn't Virginia, its Ginevra"

"Well, a pleasure to meet you, then, Ginevra" he said "Sorry about earlier, I wasn't expecting quite so many people. Care to explain, Harry?"

Winning under his Godfather's gaze, Harry replied "Well, you see---err---its like this---uhmm---When your letter came, we were already coming---together---ahh, that is---well, Ginny and me. I couldn't just cancel and not explain why, could I!?"

“Sorry for giving you the needle, Harry” Sirius laughed “I take it you two are more than --- ahh ---just friends” he waggled his eyebrows. Harry blushed and mumbled. “Sorry! Couldn’t hear you!!” Sirius exclaimed.

Harry glared at him “YES! I SAID!” he exclaimed “GINNY’S MY GIRLFRIEND!”

“Well say it that way” Sirius shot back “A boy your age should have a girlfriend. Right cute one she is too”

Ginny blushed brightly. Harry took her hand and interlaced their fingers before addressing his Godfather “Not that I’m not glad to see you, but what are you doing here, Sirius? It’s not safe for you”

“I’m doing the job your parents gave me” he replied “All these articles tell me you’re in danger. I smell trouble and I don’t think I’m not the only one. You don’t think I bought that ‘Hi Sirius, all’s well’ crap did you?”

The Bertha Jorkins article didn’t seem connected to anything, except for the fact that Minister Fudge was getting involved. But they all seized on the article about Barty Crouch being ill. Hermione scoffed at it.

“That’s not very sympathetic” Sirius scolded her

Hermione just shrugged “Serves him right for tossing off Winky”

“Tell him about spew” Ron suggested with a sarcastic laugh.

“When did he do that?” asked Sirius, unintentionally stopping an argument.

“After the Quidditch World Cup” Harry answered “She cast the Dark Mark using my wand”

Hermione looked outraged “How can you say that!?” she exclaimed.

“Crouch said so” Harry answered “And she was at the spot it was cast from and she had my wand.”

Sirius was shaking his head “No, Harry, just because the elf was there doesn’t mean she cast it. She might’ve just been in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“That’s silly, of course she did it” Ron shot back.

“Is that so?” Sirius asked “Tell me, who did he first accuse?”

Harry answered “Me”

“Well, that’s ridiculous” Ron scoffed

“Why?” asked Sirius “Harry was there, and so was his wand”

Harry just looked stunned “You’re not saying you think I did it, are you?” he asked

“Of course not, Harry” Sirius replied “But, what I am saying is there is no actual proof that you didn’t do it”

“Harry’s word is good enough for me” said Ron loyally

Hermione gave him a dirty look and said “But, you won’t believe Winky!”

“Shut up about the bloody elf, Hermione!!” Ron yelled back.

“She’s has a point about Crouch” Sirius said “He’s not to be trusted.”

“You know him, then?” asked Ginny.

Sirius nodded and said “Oh yes. He ordered me into Azkaban without a trial.” Silent shock appeared on all the teens’ faces. “Powerful wizard, he is, that Barty” Sirius continued “Hated Voldemort too, passionately. A lot of people did, but...well you’re kids...”

“Tell us we’re too young and I’ll bat-bogey hex you!” Ginny threatened

Sirius couldn't help grinning "Well...here goes" he said "Death Eaters, always in masks so you don't know who they are, were killing and torturing people at will. You never knew who might disappear next, but it happened almost daily...that's how it was back then. Then here comes Barty Crouch...Have you ever heard that Power Corrupts----"

"And Absolute Power Corrupts Absolutely" Hermione finished.

Despite the dark tone of the conversation Sirius smiled "Smartest which of your age" he praised before continuing "Anyway, Barty became head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement almost overnight. He demanded...and got...almost unlimited powers for Aurors...to kill instead of capture. A lot of people, besides me, went to Azkaban without a trial. Barty was a shoe in for Minister when his son was arrested with a group of Death Eaters"

"Was he one?" Hermione asked.

Sirius shrugged and said "Dunno, I was already in sunny Azkaban. The first time I saw him was when the Dementors tossed him in a cell near mine. Dear old daddy tossed his son in with the rest of us evil doers"

"Don't talk about yourself like that, Sirius" Harry grumbled.

Sirius gave an apologetic look before continuing "Barty Jr. died a year or so later and Crouch had just enough fatherly affection to come to his deathbed. After the scandal it caused Crouch was pushed out of the MLE and Cornelius Fudge ended up as Minister of Magic"

"Professor Moody says he's still chasing Dark Wizards" said Harry

Sirius nodded "I can believe it. He must think one more capture will restore his name"

"That's why he snuck into Snape's office!" Ron exclaimed

Sirius shook his head and said "No Ron it doesn't fit. He would be here more"

“Do you think he’s up to something?” Harry asked

“Dumbledore trusts him” Hermione pointed out.

“That doesn’t mean we should” argued Ron. Harry nodded in agreement.

Hermione threw up her hands in frustration “And he saved your life in that Quidditch match” she said

“Big deal” Ron shot back “Snape’s spent the last four years picking on everyone that Harry’s friend. Neville, me, the twins, he picks on Sue just because she sits next to me” Hermione hissed in displeasure at that remark, but Ron ignored it “And what about you? He’s called you stupid girl and a know-it-all. I’m surprised he hasn’t started on Ginny!”

“I lost forty-two points since the Yule Ball” Ginny put in

“SEE!!” Ron exclaimed, his face was red with equal parts of embarrassment, triumph and anger.

The bickering was giving Harry a headache “Why don’t we ask Sirius!?!” he shouted

“Always was slimy, my buddy Snivellus” Sirius answered, causing a round of repressed giggles “But, he came into school knowing more about Dark Arts than most of the students, even some of the Professors at the time. And almost everyone in his group became Death Eaters. A lot escaped justice, way to go Barty, but if anyone could avoid getting caught then Snape is more than smart enough to do it”

“Thought you hated Snape” Ron commented curiously.

Sirius stretched and yawned “Know thy enemy” he quoted, then he asked “What time is it?”

Harry looked at his broken watch and shrugged. Hermione answered "Three-thirty"

"You kids need to get back" Sirius said "Harry, no sneaking out. Just send me notes. You could be attacked out here."

Harry shrugged and said "Yeah, never mind merpeople, grindylows and dragons"

"Harry, I mean it" Sirius scolded

"Only if you promise to be careful" Harry countered.

"I do my best" Sirius replied "Good seeing all of you. And it was nice meeting you, Ginny"

As the group headed back to Hogwarts, Harry asked "So, what'd you think of him?"

"He's nice" Ginny replied.

Ron laughed at that "Got that right!" he said "Imagine eating rats!"

"Actually after what I heard about Scabbers he might actually be enjoying it" was Ginny's reply.



## The Darkness Rises

Ron had sent a letter to Percy immediately after the visit with Sirius. But, he didn't get a reply until after Easter. "Please don't bother me unless it's important the tosser says" said Ron throwing the letter across the table "I'll give him an important punch in his important nose!"

"Ronald, watch your language" Hermione hissed "Besides, you can't leave school grounds without permission, so you can't go to the Ministry anyway"

Ginny snatched the letter off the table and said "Loosen up Hermione. Besides there's other ways to deal this" Then she went to see Fred and George.

"Bit of a vicious streak in this one" said George when they joined the group.

Fred nodded "Yeah, wouldn't wanna be on her bad side"

"Wha'd'ja do" Ron asked, trying to swallow a mouthful of food.

Ginny grinned mischievously and explained "They know the Howler spell. So I wrote one telling Percy that family is the most important thing."

"There's nothing funny about that" Ron commented.

The twins giggled "Ohh little bro, how you underestimate the baby of the family"

"Watch yourselves, twits" Ginny threatened "Anyway, they also rigged a dungbomb to explode after the Howler finishes and it also paints STINKER on his forehead!" Harry and Ron dissolved in laughter.

Hermione huffed at them "You five realize you could get into trouble for this"

"Don't worry, Granger..." Fred said

“...Yeah, we’ll just include your name, too.” George concluded.

A week later, Ginny received a scathing letter from Percy.

Ginevra,

Your prank was uncalled for. You are obviously being influenced by George and Fred. Behavior such as this could only be frowned upon by future prospective employers and/or suitors. Indeed, I am quite tempted to report this incident myself, in the hopes of getting you back to the straight and narrow path.

Percival Ignatius Weasley

Ginny burst out laughing after she read it, which was a bit of a surprise.

“You’re not angry?!” asked Ron, incredulously

Harry appeared just then and asked “What are you yelling about now?”

“Percy thinks my reputation is in danger for following my evil twin brothers” Ginny answered. Fred and George high-fived each other. “It gets better” she laughed “He thinks I should worry about what my future boyfriends will think---”

Harry interrupted, frowning “I don’t think that’s very funny”

“I do” replied Ginny, wrapping her arms around his neck “Since I’m very happy with my current boyfriend”

Harry looked blank, then “Oh....Ohhhhh!” he replied

“Not again” Ron groaned as they kissed “Y’know I have a sensitive stomach”

Harry and Ginny giggled while still kissing. They created a minor scene as Ginny combed her fingers through Harry’s hair.

"Watch the hands" George cautioned, tapping Harry on the head with his wand.

Harry reached back and ended up swatting George on the nose "Go'way" was his muffled reply. A minute later, they were interrupted again.

"Mr. Potter, I trust you have completed your Transfiguration essay" Professor McGonagall said in a clipped tone.

Harry jumped away from Ginny "Yes, Professor!" he exclaimed, breathlessly

"Well then, I look forward to reading it" she replied "And Miss Weasley, I trust you haven't forgotten that you're due in Defense Against the Dark Arts after lunch"

Ginny blushed and tried to cover her swollen lips "No, Professor" she replied "I mean, yes...er... that's not what I...I mean, I'll be there"

"Very well, then" McGonagall concluded "However, be aware of younger students in the future and restrain yourselves in public. Or, I might be forced to give you detentions---separately"

"Yes Professor" they mumbled simultaneously.

After the Gryffindor Head left, Ginny turned on her brothers "You mean there's actually no rule against kissing?" she asked accusingly.

"Just giving young Harry the needle, there" replied George in a cajoling tone.

Fred held his hands up submissively and said "Yeah, you can't expect your older brothers to just let you go off and snog away can you?"

"Its none of your business!" Ginny snarled "Come on Harry, we've still got twenty minutes before class starts up"

Harry eagerly got up "See you guys in Transfiguration" he said "Bye Fred, bye George, bye Ron"

"I wouldn't even think of it" Hermione warned as three red-headed boys started to get up.

Harry appeared for Transfiguration with two minutes to spare. His hair was messier than usual, but, otherwise there was no visible evidence of his and Ginny's activities. He sat next to Ron as usual and said "Hey" by way of greeting.

"Have fun, mate?" asked Ron sullenly

Harry gave him an irritated look "Ginny's my girlfriend Ron. Wha'd'ya want me to say?"

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, is there a problem you would like to share with the class?" asked McGonagall in an annoyed tone.

"No, Professor" they replied together.

Draco gave a snort of amusement and said "Weasel's just jealous his sister's getting more action than him...little slag" Many Slytherins laughed at this, though Crabbe and Goyle laughed the loudest.

"Say that again, Ferret!" Ron threatened, with Harry a fraction of a second behind him.

Both boys bounced off a shield spell cast by McGonagall and landed in their seats "I will deal with this" she declared. Then turning to Draco, she said "Detention, Mr. Malfoy. With Hagrid, I think, for the next week. And no trip to Hogsmeade for you. Finally, fifty points from Slytherin and I'll also have twenty points from Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle, each!"

"What about Potter and Weasley?!" Draco complained "They were threatening me!!!"

Glaring at him, McGonagall replied "Do not question me in my class, Mr. Malfoy!" Then she began her lecture "The final subject we'll cover

this term is partial human transformations. I am sure all of you remember Mr. Krum's ..." At the end of class, she assigned an essay and said that the year end project would be accomplishing a partial transformation. She dismissed the class but asked Harry to stay.

"Yes, Professor?" asked Harry after the door clicked shut.

"Potter, Mr. Bagman will be meeting the Champions tonight at nine to explain the final task. You are to report to the Quidditch pitch, then" she said.

Harry swallowed nervously and replied "Yes, Professor" He started to leave.

"I would've rather you didn't participate in this contest" she said.

He shrugged "Me too Professor. I think it's stupid"

"I agree, Harry" she replied softly "You have done very well, especially considering you are competing against students who have several years of magical education over you. Please be careful."

Harry blushed and looked away "Thank you, Professor. I will"

At dinner, Harry ate sparingly. He mostly just played with his food. In Gryffindor tower, he relaxed enough to let Ron talk him into a game of Wizard Chess. But, he was so distracted, Ron checkmated him in three moves.

"Sorry, mate" said Ron, not looking at all sorry.

Ginny pulled out her wand and reset the board "I'll give you something to be sorry about" she challenged. Harry went to get up, but she pushed him back and sat in his lap "You don't mind, do ya?" she asked cheekily.

"And if I did?" he shot back sarcastically, but playfully.

Ginny shrugged and turned her back to him. Harry retaliated by poking her in the sides, then he moved to full on tickling.

“No...hehe...NO!! HAHAHAHA! STOP HAAAARRYYYYY!!!” she yelled squirming and struggling.

Harry stopped and the game started. Students who had been attracted by Ginny’s yelling stayed to watch the game.

“A galleon on Ron” offered Dean

“I’ll take that bet” Harry replied, earning a kiss on the cheek.

It started a chain reaction that the twins quickly took control of.

“Ten on Ginny!” Seamus announced loudly. Which brought shocked silence.

A Seventh Year girl, easily the tallest in the room stepped forward and looked down at him “You got it shrimp” she scoffed.

Seamus looked at Ginny hoping for a response, but she was concentrating on the board. Her only motions were a hand hovering over the board and absently rubbing Harry’s hand which was wrapped around her waist. Seamus repressed a disgusted look and went to sit as far away as he could with still being able to see the game.

“Aww, bugger” Harry cursed “I gotta go. Its 8:30”

Slightly startled, Ginny looked at him and asked “How come?”

“Remember the third task” replied Harry.

Ginny looked embarrassed “Sorry, I forgot” she apologized “You want me to come along?” This suggestion brought moans and groans from the onlookers.

“Better not” Harry giggled “Don’t wanna start a riot. Besides, the way McGonagall chased out Ron and Hermione when she told me, I don’t think anyone else is invited”

Ginny kissed him lingeringly and replied "Alright, I guess. But, you'll tell me all about it. Right?"

"If I do, do I get another kiss like that?" he flirted

Ginny clicked her teeth with a finger thoughtfully and said "Hmmm, I'll have to let you know"

"It's your move!" exclaimed Ron, breaking the mood.

The next morning, Harry shared the events of the previous night and Mr. Crouch's odd behavior with Ginny, Hermione and Ron.

"Krum attacked Crouch! Its obvious!" Ron declared

Hermione gave him an icy look and said "Will you stop accusing Viktor all the time!"

"You said Crouch was mumbling all the time, Harry. What was he saying?" asked Ginny.

Harry was getting impatient "He wanted to warn Dumbledore about something. He mentioned Bertha Jorkins and he was talking to Percy as if he was at work...Percy wasn't even there. He also acted like he was talking to his son. But, Barty Jr. died in Azkaban. I said that before."

"Er...what did he say about...umm...You-Know-Who?" asked Ron.

"That Voldemort is getting stronger again" Harry replied testily, emphasizing the feared name taking a little pleasure in watching Ron flinch.

Ginny gave him a dirty look and snapped "Don't you get tired of shocking people, Harry?"

"Actually, I'm tired of people jumping all the time!" he fired back "Its not even a real word! Hermione was right, before! Fear of a name only increase fear of it...something like that. Besides, you faced him too. You shouldn't any more afraid of him than me"

Ginny was torn between being angry and being flattered. Finally, she smiled "Never thought of it that way" she admitted "Sorry 'bout that"

"Forget it, Gin" he replied, rubbing her leg. "So who won the chess game?" he asked trying to lighten the mood.

Hermione answered "Ron did, but I don't think he's really happy about it"

"I only won a pawn race" he complained, glaring at Hermione.

Ginny was positively gleeful "Surprised ya, did I, Ron?"

"Umph" Ron grunted unhappily.

Harry laughed slightly, drawing a glare from Ron "Sorry I wasn't laughing at you Ron" he apologized "I was just thinking that Seamus must be really put out by the whole thing. And if he tries to welch, Smythe...well...she'll just step on him."

"She is pretty tall" Ginny chuckled "Wonder if she's related to Hagrid"

The moment of levity was just what the group needed.

Just a couple of days later, in the Hall, Harry started to brood. "How am I supposed to do this?" he grumbled "Dodge some of Hagrid's adorable creatures and get through a maze full of traps and tricks---"

"You could always wander around it for a while then throw up the red sparks" Ginny offered in a brittle tone.

"Great help" Harry fired back sarcastically.

Ginny gave him an angry look and replied "Don't get all pissy, Harry. If you want help, ask for it." She got up and left. Harry felt even more miserable than before. Hermione and Ron kept quiet through the rest of lunch.



“Potter, stay after class” Professor Moody said, at the end of Defence class.

“Yessir” Harry muttered.

The classroom emptied except for the trio. “Granger, Weasley you’ll be late for Transfiguration.”

“With all due respect, Professor Moody, so will Harry” said Hermione.

Moody’s third eye locked on Hermione while his natural eye was still on Harry “True, Miss Granger” he said gruffly “But, while Potter will have a note from me, you and Weasley will not. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yessir” replied Ron, pulling on Hermione’s arm “See ya , Harry. C’mom”

Moody continued to frown until the classroom door swung shut. Then he guffawed “Hold on to those two, Potter! At any rate, your girlfriend made a lot of sense earlier. Put them to good use, it’ll be good for all of you.”

“Huh?” a confused Harry questioned

“It wouldn’t be sporting to GIVE you the answers, Potter” Moody said, scribbling a note “Better hurry, too, this note only gives you six minutes to get to class”

Harry blinked in shock “But, Professor! It takes at least ten minutes!” he protested.

“Only in crowded halls. I suggest you don’t dawdle. The clock starts now” with that, Moody flicked his wand at the parchment. Harry glanced at it, floating just above it was a small clock running backwards. He took off.

Arriving at the Great Hall for dinner that evening, Harry was pleased to see Ginny near where they normally sat. He hoped the argument they’d had was over. She was talking with Seamus. “Hi, Ginny” he

said, lightly touching her shoulder. Then he added "Hey, mate" to Seamus.

"Potter" replied Seamus, coldly. Then addressing Ginny, he said "See what I mean?"

Harry looked back and forth between them "Got a problem, Finnegan?" he asked

"Maybe this was a private conversation" replied Seamus, accusingly "But you just felt free to butt in, eh Mr. Hero"

Harry looked hurt "We've been mates since First Year" he said "You know I don't ---"

"Whatever" Seamus said, cutting Harry off "I used to believe that---"

This time, Harry cut Seamus off "Then go get a Potter Stinks badge!" he snapped "Malfoy could always use another crony or two!"

"Is there a problem, Mr. Potter?" a silky voice asked.

Harry cringed, recognizing it before he even turned "No, Professor Snape" he replied

"Dinner is ready to begin" Snape continued "I suggest you find yourself a seat ... elsewhere ... Mr. Finnegan"

Seamus nodded sullenly and said "Yes, Professor"

"What brought that on?" asked Harry. Ron and Hermione arrived and asked the same thing.

"How should I know?" a frustrated Ginny replied "Look, me and Seamus were just talking about the chess game when Harry came up and, well I do kind of feel bad he lost all that money"

"He made the bet, you didn't, Gin" Hermione observed.

"But still---" she started

"If Seamus wants to be a git, that's his business" Harry grumbled  
"Look, Gin, I'm sorry about earlier. You were right, I was just sulking."

Ginny smiled, replying "I understand, Harry. Actually, I was going to apologize to you. I overreacted, too"

"So, we're ok?" Harry asked, half smiling. In response Ginny gave him a soft kiss. He groaned when she pulled away.

Ginny laughed "Sorry, Harry" she said "Mustn't upset my brother's sensitive stomach" Before lights out, they had a plan in place. Right before going up, Ginny commented "This has great benefits for me. If I'm angry at you ZAP! And you can't even get mad"

"What have I gotten myself into?" Harry groaned

The following weekend, a furious McGonagall descended on them near the transformed Quidditch Pitch "EXPELLIARMUS!!" she cried, confiscating their wands "Explain yourselves at once! The four of you!!!"

"I'm practicing for the maze, Professor" Harry explained.

Ron put in hastily "We're only using mild curses and hexes"

"Well, except Ginny" Harry joked, rubbing his shoulder.

Ginny blushed and scowled at the same time "It was mild" she complained

"Well no more practicing out here" said McGonagall "I'll allow you access to an empty classroom. And you must notify Madame Pomfrey when you will be ...practicing" The Gryffindor Head gave them a look of very mixed emotions and departed.

Once she was safely out of sight, Ginny attacked Harry "Except for Ginny!" she exclaimed "Are you trying to get me into trouble?"

“You don’t need my help for that” Harry teased, dodging a slap.  
“Yiiikkkeees!” Harry yelled as he fell to the ground.

Ginny pounced on top and declared “Victory!!”

“I surrender” replied Harry

Ginny looked down in surprise and said “You never give up like that”

“I like it here” he replied, looking back up.

“Let’s go Ron. They want to be alone” they heard from Hermione.

By the day before the Final Task, Harry could dodge all three of them firing spells at him. Instead of feeling miserable and snapping at people he felt upbeat and confident. At dinner, he said “I think its time to let the twins off the hook. How about you guys?”

“You mean about the Marauders?” asked Ron

Harry nodded “Yeah, I’d love a good laugh before tomorrow”

“Hold that thought” Ginny said urgently “Hey Colin! Come here!”

Colin Creevey looked up from helping Dennis with a History project  
“What’s up?” he questioned as he strolled over.

“How would you like to help in a prank on my brothers?” asked Ginny

Colin hesitated “That’s ...ahh...not safe. What would I have to do?  
What...exactly...would I have to do???”

“Oh, come on, I’ll protect you” she scoffed “Besides, they never do anything really painful, or permanent. All you need to do is take a few pictures.”

Still slightly doubtful, Colin said “Alright” and headed for his dorm.

When Fred and George arrived in the Common Room it was fairly deserted. They were just getting off detention with Professor Snape and had been kept late.

"Have a seat" Harry offered.

The twins tried to decline "Sore fingers" Fred complained.

"Really beat" George added.

"It's important" Hermione said

The twins shook their heads as one and headed for the stairs.

"One word" added Ron "Marauders"

All sleepiness banished, the twins rushed over "Talk" they demanded in one voice.

"Fred, George, I give you Prongs Jr. and Associates" said Harry with his arms open.

The twins exchanged glances and shrugs "This is serious business" George said.

"Not a matter to be taken at all lightly" Fred added.

"Interesting choice of words there, George" commented Ginny. "What would you say if I told you that you already know two Marauders and the son of another?"

"And somehow you discovered this, while we didn't?" Asked Fred.

Shaking his head George answered "Highly doubtful"

"Prongs Jr. at your service" Harry said "And I am most grateful at the return of my father's property"

The twins' jaws froze in place and a few telltale clicks were heard.

“Bloody...”

“...Hell”

“No foul language in front of the little sister” Ron said severely

“It was you four with the snow in bed prank!” George accused

Ginny laughed “Took you long enough” and there were a couple more clicks.

“Tut, tut” said Hermione in a professor tone “Mr. and Mr. Weasley, you two need a history lesson. Who taught Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts last year?”

“Remus Lupin” they answered confidently.

Ron shook his head “Sorry, you get a T for the day. Both of you. The correct answer is Moony!” There was another flutter of clicking

“This one is mine” Harry said “Sirius Black didn’t betray my parents. He’s my Godfather and he’s Padfoot”

Ron’s expression became grave “The true traitor’s name is Peter Pettigrew. He lived with us for twelve years. Rather a long life for a common rat don’t you think” almost exactly quoting Sirius from the year before.

“That’s quite a tale, little brother” said Fred, after hearing the whole thing.

“Do you three go looking for trouble?” asked George.

Harry gave them an annoyed look and said “Why go looking for it? It finds me just fine.”

“Good point” George replied.

“So, ready for tomorrow?” asked Fred.

Harry nodded "Actually, this time I feel pretty good about it"

"Great, we'll be there cheering for you" said George.

"Yawn Thanks guys Yawn" said Harry.

"It is past curfew" Hermione observed.

Harry didn't disagree "I'm going, I'm going. But not before I say goodnight to my girlfriend."

"This—means—all—Weasleys—not—me—can—leave" said Ginny, as if talking to four year olds.

Possibly an hour later, Harry crawled into bed. Thankfully, Ron was snoring away. He didn't feel like explaining the huge grin that was stuck on his face. His dreams were quite pleasant that night.

"GOOD MORNING HARRY!" penetrated Harry's slumber, just before a pillow crashed on his head.

"Ron!" Harry yelled, indignantly, rolling off the bed.

Ron laughed and offered a hand to help him off the floor "C'mon, Harry. McGonagall said the Champions' families are all here for the final task."

"She can't mean the Dursleys!" Harry exclaimed "Ugh, I think I just lost my appetite."

Ron shrugged "Dunno, I'm sure George and Fred would love to see them again, though"

"Maybe it wouldn't be too bad, at that" Harry laughed "I would enjoy that"

"You talk in your sleep, Potter" said Seamus, resentfully.

Harry gave him a nasty look and said "I've got bigger problems today, Finnegan. Go play with Malfoy."

“What is your problem, anyway?” asked Ron.

“It’s your sister he was talking about, Ron” Seamus replied, then he left.

Embarrassed, but angry, Harry yelled “Mind your own business!”

“He’s jealous” Dean replied “He wanted to take Ginny to the ball. But, he overheard you asking her.”

Harry almost exploded, but in the end he just shrugged his shoulders and said “Ehh...not my problem. So who wants to meet my Muggle relatives?” Down in the Common Room, he looked around for Ginny. To his annoyance Seamus was included in the group she was talking with.

“Mmmm, morning Harry” said Ginny, on seeing him.

Her bright smile blew away Harry’s anger “You look beautiful this morning” he said, pulling her into a kiss. They ignored the catcalls and whistles.

“Wish I could get a kiss like that, Harry” one of Ginny’s dormmates sighed.

Ginny broke the kiss and said “Get your own” in a dismissive tone.

“Can I talk to you in private for a while?” asked Harry.

Ginny nodded “Sure, see you guys later. Is something wrong?”

“Uhh... not exactly, It’s...well I’ll tell---” said Harry

He was cut off by an angry remark from Seamus “Stop butting into other people’s conversations, Potter!”

“Bugger yourself, Finnegan!” replied Harry as he rested an arm across Ginny’s shoulders.



As they walked, Ginny asked “What was that about?”

“This looks like a good spot” Harry said. He leaned against a wall and wrapped his arms around her. “Not important” he said, unconcerned.

“What is it then?” Ginny persisted.

After a moment’s hesitation, Harry said “McGonagall told Ron that the Champions’ families are all here. And...well...I’d understand if you don’t want to. I mean I don’t either but...hell I can’t even believe they wanted to come.”

“What are you talking about?” a confused Ginny asked.

Harry sighed “The Dursleys”

“Ohh...I see” replied Ginny, gently “Come on, Harry, I have a surprise for you” Harry didn’t budge, so she urged him forward by pulling on his hand.

Very reluctantly, Harry allowed himself to be pulled “Any chance I could run into the maze now?” he asked. Stopping at the door to a small room near the Great Hall, he peaked in and saw Cedric and his parents, Viktor with his and Fleur with her family. Gabrielle waved at him. Harry waved back, grinning

Ginny pushed him into the room, where he was met by an enthusiastic hug from Mrs. Weasley “Good to see you, Harry!” she gushed “We just had to come and watch you!”

“Thanks, Mrs. Weasley” said Harry, genuinely surprised and pleased “Way better than the Dursleys”

Bill extended his hand “Good to see you, Harry. Anyone that can out-prank the twins has got style” he said. Then with his other hand he reached over and ruffled Ginny’s hair “So, where’s this new boyfriend of yours, shorty?”

“Give me another reason to hex you!” growled Ginny, but she hugged him, anyway “He’s around somewhere, I guess.”

Harry realized he was being teased “Ahh...Mrs. Weasley, I wonder would you mind having someone else sit with you and Bill?” he asked.

“I don’t think it would be a problem, Harry” she replied “Who did you have in mind?”

Pretending to be embarrassed, he looked down and said “You see...it’s like this. I’ve got a girlfriend and I thought you might like to meet her...She’s nice and all, bit of a temper though”

“And where might this girl be, Harry?” Bill asked, a smile was pulling at his lips.

Harry shrugged nonchalantly and started looking around “Don’t see her at the moment” he replied “Looks a bit like your sister though”

“Imagine that” Bill commented, blandly.

Ginny’s eyes flashed and she swatted Harry’s chest “This was supposed to be my joke” she complained.

“Well, I guess so” Mrs. Weasley said as she carefully studied her fingernails.

Ginny glared at her “Mother! You’re not helping!”

“Ginevra!” she shot back in the same tone.

“Not one comment about my name, Harry!” Ginny warned him.

“Actually, I was thinking it’s very pretty and it fits you” he replied.

Ginny blushed brightly “Oh, that’s sweet” she said bashfully and kissed him.

“Pretty smooth, Harry” Bill commended “But what about your girlfriend?”

Mrs. Weasley slapped him on the head and said "Stop teasing them, William. You're not so old I can't have you degnome the garden"

"Yes, Mum" Bill grumbled, rubbing his head.

"She might not do that if you were married" Ginny commented. Bill frowned at her.

Harry didn't know if Ginny had seen the same thing he had, so he added "I noticed someone checking you out earlier"

"Who?" asked Bill.

Harry was still looking at Ginny "Well, telling you wouldn't be sporting. But, I'll give you a clue it was one of the other Champions. C'mon, we'll show ya around" They wandered around the grounds until suppertime.

At supper, all the Weasleys sat with Harry at one end of the Gryffindor table. Ginny on his left, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley on his right and Ron and Hermione directly across from him. Harry ate rather sparingly, and as the color of the enchanted ceiling changed from daylight to dusk, Harry's legs started vibrating with nervous energy.

"Relax, Harry, you'll do fine" said Ginny as she rested her hand on his knee.

Harry clasped her hand and said "Thanks, Gin"

"Ladies and Gentlemen" Dumbledore's voice boomed across the Hall "I would ask that the Champions follow Mr. Bagman at this time. Everyone else, please finish your excellent meals. We will follow them, shortly. Thank you."

Harry got up to the cheers of the Gryffindors. He wasn't surprised to see Seamus just sitting there. What did surprise him was, as he was walking between the tables, Susan Bones stopping him.

"Good luck, Harry" she said.

Harry blinked at her, rather dumbly “Err...thanks Susan...but why? I mean aren't you rooting for Cedric?”

“Well, yeah” the Hufflepuff admitted “We're in the same House and I'd like him to win. But, I just want to see everyone come out of that maze.”

Harry felt a chill for a moment. It occurred to him that this would be the most dangerous task and Susan had really driven the point home. “Thanks a lot” he said sincerely and offered his hand.

“See you soon, Harry” she replied, returning his gentle squeeze.

Ginny was at the door with the Champions, looking angry “And what was that all about?” she asked.

“Huh?” a confused Harry replied.

Ginny huffed impatiently and answered “Susan Bones”

“Nothing, she was wishing me good luck and I shook her hand” he said, even more confused “Look, I don't know what you're upset about. But, I'd really like you to be with me before I go in that maze. So...umm... would you? Please?”

Ginny gave a half smile and replied “Sure, Harry” That was good enough for Harry

After Mr. Bagman sent the Champions into the maze, the waiting began.

From the point of view of the people in the stands, the third task was rather dull. Owls would arrive from the professors who were patrolling the outside of the maze giving the occasional update as to which champion was where, but not being able to see really meant that the spectators would be waiting until someone grabbed the Goblet from the center of the maze.

“Are you alright, dear?” Mrs. Weasley asked of her daughter.

Ginny nodded absently and said "Sure, Mum" A few minutes later, Ginny tapped Hermione on the shoulder "Can I ...err...talk to you? In private?"

"Sure, Gin, lets take a walk" replied Hermione.

Ron grabbed her hand "C'mon, you'll miss something!" he protested.

"Let go, Ronald!" Hermione ordered "It's only been a half hour! We won't be too far away!"

"I'll bring you back some pumpkin juice" Ginny offered. Ron nodded in agreement.

Hermione giggled and said "He's too easy"

"Come on, Hermione! This is important!" exclaimed Ginny, pulling at her other arm.

Hermione was dragged out of the stands despite her shouts of "Slow down!" and "I'm coming!" Finally, near a tree she planted a foot firmly in place and yanked back.

"What!?" Ginny asked, crossly.

"Don't you think we've come far enough?" Hermione asked, sarcastically.

Ginny looked around and sheepishly replied "Umm...yeah...I guess. Err...sorry"

"So, what was so important that you had to almost yank off my arm?" Hermione asked as she rubbed her shoulder.

"Did you see Harry talking to Susan Bones?" asked Ginny.

Hermione frowned at the younger girl and said "Ginny all she did was wish him luck and shake hands. Please tell me you didn't argue with him about that. Especially right before he went into the maze"

“Well...not exactly” Ginny replied “I was just feeling a little---”

“Jealous” said Hermione, finishing the thought “Look, Harry doesn’t think that way. Shaking hands with Susan meant no more to him than shaking hands with—with...ahh...Ron”

Ginny looked down, guiltily and kicked at the ground “Oh” she said.

“It’s probably not on his mind now. So I wouldn’t worry about it too much” Hermione said in a comforting tone. “Just talk to him about it afterward, maybe tomorrow after all this is over.”

Ginny nodded “Ok, thanks Hermione”

The two girls returned to the stands just in time to see Hagrid laying Fleur down in the Beauxbatons section “Poor gel” he said “Ga’ all tangled up in the ‘edges. Lucky she go’ off the flares” Fleur’s cape was torn and one of her sleeves was torn off.

Half an hour later, Professor Snape brought out Viktor in a full body bind “Someone had an Imperious Curse on him” he reported.

Tension in the stands was very high an hour later when a flash of light tossed Harry and Cedric onto the ground. Seeing the Goblet, everyone started cheering and the band started playing. Fleur was the first to notice Cedric’s dead eyes. She let out a blood-curdling scream. The band stopped playing and Dumbledore ran over. Only a few people heard Harry’s actual words, but it quickly went through the stands. Amos Diggory pushed through the crowd, knocking a number of people over, knelt beside his son’s body and began wailing in grief. Professor Moody was seen half dragging half carrying Harry back to the castle.

Ron, Ginny and Hermione had finally pushed their way through the crowd to the Headmaster. “Professor Dumbledore, where did Professor Moody take Harry?” asked a worried Hermione.

“Oh, to the hospital wing, I imagine” he replied “Harry was bleeding from his arm”

Hermione shook her head violently "That doesn't make sense!" she exclaimed "Madame Pomfrey is still here!"

"Severus! Minerva!" Dumbledore exclaimed suddenly "Come with me!!" They didn't see the headmaster for almost two hours. "Yes, you may all stay, if that is Harry's wish. But, I insist that you not question him tonight"

"Headmaster! Surely you know, there are no animals allowed in the hospital ward" Madame Pomfrey protested.

Hermione, Ron and Ginny hid grins as Dumbledore replied "I think we can make an exception for this one. He will look out for Harry very well"

"Hi all" Harry said weakly

Ginny was the first to notice his arm "What happened to your---" She was cut off by a growling from the large dog. "Sorry" she said meekly, kissing his knuckles

"Are you sure about this---creature, Albus?" asked Mrs. Weasley.

Dumbledore chuckled lightly and replied "Yes, Molly. He's very protective of Harry and smarter than he looks"

Harry managed a faint laugh, and the dog lightly swatted Harry's leg with his tail.

"Here, Mr. Potter, is a dreamless sleep potion" Madame Pomfrey said, handing him a goblet.

Harry downed it and quickly nodded off. A timeless period later, voices intruded on Harry's sleep. Then he realized it was shouting. Finally, he was fully awake. But he didn't have the energy to be angry. He was quite pleasantly surprised to see Ginny laying her head next to his. Though, obviously she could sleep through anything. The first thing Harry heard clearly was Dumbledore

"---Harry---not---addled brains!" the Headmaster yelled

Then Fudge, just as loudly “---never heard of a scar acting as an alarm bell!”

“The only addled brains are yours!” Harry jumped in “I saw Voldemort come back! Death Eaters, too! Lucius Malfoy for starters!!”

Fudge stepped back “DO NOT USE THE NAME!” he practically cried.

“COWARD!!” Harry screamed “VOLDEMORT!! VOLDEMORT!! VOLDEMORT!! Look, I’m still here!!! I dueled him! HE COULDN’T BEAT ME!! AND I’M JUST A KID!!!”

Fudge turned back to Dumbledore “This child is obviously unbalanced.” He said “Accusing a pillar of the community like the Malfoys. And casting about You-Know-Who’s---”

“NO! I don’t know who” Harry sneered “You want more names. Crabbe, McNair, Goyle, Avery---”

Fudge was almost a Dursley shade of purple “Silence, boy” he ordered coldly “You will not ruin all my years of hard work!”

“DON’T EVER CALL ME THAT!!!” Harry roared.

At that point, Mrs. Weasley interjected herself “Enough, Harry” she said “some more dreamless sleep is what you need”

“Maybe you’ll believe Voldemort’s back when he comes and shoves his wand up your arse?” was Harry’s parting shot. He turned, allowing Mrs. Weasley to take him back.

Not halfway back, they were met by the rest of the Weasleys “Quite a performance, there, young Harry” said Fred appreciatively”

“Worth at least fifty points” George added.

“Give’em to Hufflepuff” Harry snapped. Then he muttered “Don’t wanna be ruddy boy who lived” as his legs gave out.



Ginny caught him "I'm rather fond of him" she said, groaning with the effort "Just lean on me"

"Best offer I had" he joked "Thanks Gin"

The argument between Fudge and Dumbledore escalated again. Harry just soaked it in, learning more about the whole war in four minutes than he had in four years of History of Magic.

Finally Dumbledore sighed "You will do as you must, Cornelius, as will I"

"I believe you've had free rein in this school too long, Dumbledore" Fudge shot back "Werewolves, giants, that quack Trelawney, need I go on. The Ministry will take a more active role in the running of this school."

"I, of course, have no objection to that Cornelius. As long as you understand that I am the headmaster" replied Dumbledore.

Fudge huffed importantly and replied "I think that's all the time I have this evening. Oh...one last thing. There should have been a ceremony, but under the circumstances...your winnings" he tossed a bag of gold coins on Harry's bedside table.

"What circumstances, Cornelius?" Harry asked icily "Remember, Voldemort's not back, is he?"

Fudge walked out without another word.

"Harry! You can't talk to the Minister of Magic like that!" she scolded. The dog on Harry's bed growled at her and Hermione blinked in surprise.

Harry laughed and said "You tell'er Padfoot!"

"Very well, then" Dumbledore said "William, if you will, please contact your father, quietly and ask him to contact the old gang"

Bill nodded and said "Yes sir. Take care of my little sister, Harry." He departed after kissing Molly.

"I'll give him little sister!" Ginny grumbled.

Dumbledore touched a finger to her shoulder, and Ginny found she couldn't stand "Later Miss Weasley" he said "For now, I have jobs for the two of you" he specifically eyed the dog

"Sirius Black!!" Molly screamed in horror as the dog changed. Her wand was out instantly.

All four of her children jumped between them. Surprising everyone, Ron yelled "Shut up, Mum!"

"I will not work with HIM!" said Snape, full of hatred and loathing

Dumbledore stared them both down, then said "Severus, Sirius it is time to put aside your differences and work together for the greater good"

"For Harry, I will" Sirius said, still giving a nasty look. Snape glared, but nodded his head about a sixteenth of an inch.

After watching them leave, Harry commented sarcastically "With allies like them, who needs Voldemort?"

"We will, Harry, never doubt that" Dumbledore scolded, gently "You need your sleep now. And I need to visit Cedric's family. I'll leave you now, but we'll see each other soon"

Harry nodded, holding back tears and after another flask of dreamless sleep potion, fell deeply asleep.

Meeting the Diggorys was uncomfortable all around and did nothing to ease Harry's guilt. And it seemed he couldn't give the award money away. Mrs. Weasley had refused, so did Cedric's parents. Walking around the school was painful. People stopped talking when they saw him approach. If he could've, Harry would've done nothing

but pull the curtains around his four-poster bed and stay there. He finally compromised with staying in the Gryffindor Common Room.

“Gin, why are people avoiding me?” asked Harry, feeling quite depressed.

Ginny shrugged “I dunno, Harry.” She replied “While you were asleep, Dumbledore did ask the school not to pressure you into discussing what happened.”

“Some people blame me for what happened to Cedric, don’t they?” he asked.

Hermione jumped in, saying “How about some exploding snap?”

“We could sneak down to the kitchens for some food” Ron suggested.

Ginny gave him a suggestive look and said “Y’know Harry we could lock ourselves in the Defense classroom for a couple of hours.

“Y’know, except for Professor Lupin, Barty Jr.’s probably the best Defense teacher we’ve ever had” joked Harry “I like him even better now that he’s gone!”

“But, Harry” Ron began. Then he stopped himself and waved his hand “Never mind, go ahead. We’ll see you later” Harry slipped an arm around Ginny’s waist and they left.

After the Fat Lady swung closed again, Hermione said “You were going to try and stop them, weren’t you”

“Yeah, well...I was” Ron admitted. Hermione smiled and kissed his cheek “Wha’d’ya do that for?!” a blushing Ron asked.

“That was a very nice thing you just did” Hermione explained, tolerantly. She patted Ron’s knee and summoned a chess set from the wall “Let’s see how you do against me” she challenged.

Invisible, the Headmaster trailed Harry and Ginny. “Sorry for the hard year, Harry. I wish there had been another way.” he apologized

silently. Outside the Defense classroom, he watched as the doorknob briefly glowed red. "Where did they find that charm?" he wondered. Then he added a repulsive spell that would keep everyone out of even the hallway.

"I really don't feel like doing this." said Harry as they made their way to the Great Hall for the leaving feast.

"Come on Harry" Hermione coaxed "Everyone has to be at the Year End Feast"

"I don't feel like celebrating. And I'm not interested in who won the House Cup" Harry complained.

Hermione nudged him a bit and said "Harry, I really don't think Professor Dumbledore would be throwing a party today."

"There is something I'm happy about" said Ginny "You're still here, Harry. What you said to Fudge the other day was true."

Instead of the traditional decorations, the banners of the winning House, hanging from the ceiling were black banners. Harry wasn't sure if it made him feel better or worse. Unlike the noise of previous years, this time it was very quiet. There were hushed conversations. The food was as good as always, but he mostly pushed it around his plate.

"It appears none of us feel like eating today" Professor Dumbledore began his speech "Certainly understandable, however I caution you all not to get too caught up in your grief. Hogwarts is greatly honored to have hosted the Tri-Wizard Tournament this year and I wish to thank the students of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang for gracing us with their company this year."

There was a faint round of applause.

"This year, the staff has agreed there will be no House Cup award." Dumbledore continued "This in honor of one who should be with us. Please raise your glasses to Cedric Diggory"

Everyone in the hall stood and drank, then said "To Cedric Diggory"

"The Ministry of Magic would have you believe Cedric's death was an accident or due some mistake on his part. This is an insult to a fine young man!" Dumbledore declared. Then more quietly he went on to explain "Cedric was murdered by Lord Voldemort. The Ministry either wishes to deny this is true, or believes you are too young."

On that depressing note, the students left for their dormitories. The next morning saw the departure of the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students.

"I 'ope to see you again, Arry" Fleur Delacour said, holding out her hand "I am 'oping to move 'ere, to eemprove moi's Eeenglish."

"It's already pretty good" Ron offered, earning a scowl from Hermione and a smile from the Veela.

Harry took Fleur's hand and replied "Well, I'm sure you could get one wherever you wanted. I happen to know a curse-breaker that works for Gringotts. Maybe you should start there."

"Maybe" Fleur muttered and departed.

Harry grinned at her departing back. Ginny nudged him and asked "What're you staring at?"

"Your brother's next girlfriend" replied Harry.

Ginny wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him "Ok, then" she said.

"Were you jealous, Gin?" asked Harry.

Surprised, Ginny replied "NO!" then she added "Well, a little bit. Don't you think she's pretty?"

"Well, yeah" Harry admitted "But, she's definitely got one flaw"

"Oh?" questioned Ginny.

Harry smiled and playfully tossed some of Ginny's hair across her face "Yup" he answered "Wrong hair color"

"You gonna fall for something like that?" asked Ron in a scornful tone.

"Shut up, Ron!" came from both Ginny and Hermione, although Ginny's response was rather muffled as a result of her lips being pressed into Harry's. Ron found himself rather alone when Viktor Krum took Hermione some distance away to say goodbye.

"I wonder if Harry iz still affected by za Gillyweed" Viktor commented when he and Hermione returned.

Hermione's impassive face broke and she chuckled "That still wouldn't explain Ginny"

"Stop it!" Ginny exclaimed, breaking the kiss. Harry was red as well.

Viktor shook hands with Harry and Ginny, just as Fleur had, then looked at Ron doubtfully. Ron hesitated, then offered his. "It vas goot to haf met you all" said Viktor. He relaxed quite a bit when Ron asked him for his autograph.

The return ride on the train was the best time Harry had in days. The weather was perfect and he was finally able to talk about some of what happened that night. They stopped talking when the lunch trolley came by. Hermione paid for everyone and as she put her money away she pulled out a copy of the Daily Prophet. "A little present for you, Harry" she said "Nothing bad at all in here. There's a small article about you winning the final task, but no mention of Cedric.

"I'd rather something about him" said Harry in a grumpy tone, flipping through it "Wonder what Rita's got to say. Couldn't shut her up I suppose."

Hermione grinned like a Cheshire cat "Ooh, I took care of that. She won't be bugging us anymore"

“But you said bugs don’t work in very magical areas” Harry reminded her.

Hermione reached into her bookbag saying “Not electronic ones, Harry. And you can thank Ronald and Sirius for helping me put the pieces together”

“I think I get it” said Ginny.

Hermione displayed a small glass jar and shook it around triumphantly “Rita Skeeter is an Animagus...an unregistered one at that. Remind you of someone, Harry? She can turn into a beetle! Rather ugly one at that, too”

“Wicked!” Ron declared “Malfoy knew, didn’t he...that day we saw him acting weird”

Hermione gave him a huge grin “Well done!” she exclaimed “Full marks, Mr. Weasley!”

“Scary, ain’t she?” asked Ron, tapping on the jar “So, gonna keep’er there---” Ron’s question was cut off as the compartment door flew open. Hermione quickly tucked the jar away

With a sneering laugh, Draco Malfoy said “Don’t bother hiding Skeeter. We’re not gonna tell, are we boys?”

“Duh, no Draco” Crabbe said. Goyle nodded.

Hermione’s head snapped around “No idea what you’re talking about, Draco”

“Oh, please, we heard every word. I know you caught the insect” Draco scoffed “It’s fine as far as I’m concerned. As far as I’m concerned you can step on her.”

“Get out, Malfoy” Harry snarled, clutching Ginny’s hand.

Draco cast his eyes around the compartment “They’ll be first, Potter.” He threatened looking at Ron and Hermione. “Though I suppose she

might have her uses” Draco said, sticking a finger under Ginny’s chin and forcing her to look up “Not exactly the best looking, but a bit easy I underst---”

Flashes and bangs filled the compartment. Harry blinked and looked down. Draco and his bodyguards were out cold on the floor.

Fred stepped into the compartment saying “Hmm, interesting.” He either didn’t notice or he didn’t care that he’d stepped on Goyle’s hand.

“Looked like there might be trouble.” George commented “So we followed” As he stepped in he stood on Malfoy’s chest.

Harry decided Fred’s actions were deliberate “Yeah...erm...would you mind taking out the trash?” he asked lightly.

“Not very hospitable are they?” Fred asked, looking at George.

George looked back “I quite agree, my dear brother.” He replied sounding very put out “Here we come to grace them with our presence and we have to clean up their mess. Hmpf! Kids these days!”

Playing exploding snap, the slightly crowded group kept tossing cards on Crabbe, Malfoy and Goyle as they went off. You would think everyone was trying to lose. By the end of the ride, the three unconscious boys had burn marks everywhere. Plus footprints on their clothes. The train pulled into King’s Cross and began emptying.

Harry held the twins back “Look, guys” he said “I’ve been trying to get rid of this and no one wants it” he thrust the bag of gold containing the TriWizard winnings into George’s hands.

“What?” asked a stunned Fred.

George pushed it back at Harry “No way”

“NO I’m not!” replied Harry forcefully “Get you joke shop started”



“There must be...”

“...a thousand Galleons”

“We couldn’t----”

Harry cut off the twinspeak, saying “Look, if you don’t I’ll toss it...no...better yet...I’ll leave it here for Malfoy and his boyfriends. Its money well spent if I get a few laughs. I only have two conditions.

“What might...”

“...they be?”

“You can’t tell your mother” Harry fake whispered “And please get Ron some good dress robes, without involving me.”

Much to Harry’s amusement, Uncle Vernon and Dudley were standing between platforms nine and ten when he stepped through. “Stop wasting time, boy” Uncle Vernon snapped at him.

“We’ll get on Professor Dumbledore to have you come as soon as possible” Mrs. Weasley said in his ear as she hugged him tightly.

Harry hugged her back and said “I’m looking forward to it, this year more than ever”

“I’m sure you are” she replied “I think we’ll probably have a few new rules to discuss, won’t we” her look was a bit stern

Harry backed away a bit and said “Err...yes ma’am”

“Mum’s bark is worse than her bite” said Ginny as she replaced her mother wrapping herself around Harry.

He hugged her back a little shyly, very conscious of Mrs. Weasley’s presence. He tried to kiss her cheek, but Ginny grabbed both sides of his face and pulled him into a kiss. “Err...bye...Gin” he said breathlessly four minutes later.

“Thanks Harry” Fred and George said by way of a goodbye.

“See ya, mate” said Ron, slapping him on the back.

“Stay in touch” Hermione said. She hugged him briefly and kissed his cheek.

Uncle Vernon, highly impatient, snarled “Stop making a spectacle of yourself, boy! I’ve got more important things to do than wait for you.”

“Gottago” Harry said in a rush. He couldn’t bring himself to look at Mrs. Weasley. “Coming Uncle Vernon”

Out at the car, Uncle Vernon opened the trunk with his key and said “Hurry up, Potter. Anything you don’t get in in two minutes stays here” Then he walked around to the driver’s side and climbed in.

“I’m gonna help, Dad” said Dudley.

Harry was shocked “Huh?” he spluttered.

“Yeah” Dudley sneered “I scratch your back and you get one of those little hotties to scratch my bal---”

Seeing red, Harry struck before Dudley could finish. Harry drove his knee into the very place his cousin was referring to “Not a chance Dudders” Harry whispered harshly, glaring down at the suffering Dudley “Remember what happened to your dear auntie”

Harry managed to pack all his things into the trunk while Dudley recovered and put Hedwig into the back seat beside him. The ride back to Privet Dr. was in complete silence, which suited Harry just fine.

## The Worst Summer

It had been about two weeks since Harry last saw the Weasleys and Hermione. He missed them all, especially Ginny, Ron and Hermione. To keep himself from being depressed, he focused on his memories of his time with Ginny this past year. But, inevitably, the bad memories crept in. Ron arguing with him at the beginning of the year and memories of the TriWizard Tournament were unpleasant, but they didn't compare to the ones of the graveyard.

Wormtail appeared carrying an ugly green-grey lump of flesh, then a hissing voice ordered "Kill the spare!"

"AVADA KEDARVA!" yelled Wormtail

Then Cedric's eyes staring blankly up at Harry.

Harry relived those images and again woke up screaming "CEDRIC!!" Yet again, he banged his head when he tried to sit up. "Bloody stupid, stink'n ruddy sodding cupboard!!" he cursed and kicked the door. This time, unlike others, the lock on the outside gave way and the door flew open. A thrill of fear rippled through him briefly. Then, his stomach growled loudly.

He had only been given what would fit through the slots in the door. So, Harry made for the kitchen, and went for the refrigerator. The first thing he grabbed was an almost empty jar of pickles. He reached in, scooped them out and swallowed them whole. Bread, which was all he'd had for the last week was shoved aside roughly, crushed in the process. He tore open a package and devoured most of a pound of cheese two and three slices at a time. His hunger sated, and in truth, feeling slightly queasy, Harry sat down. He couldn't care less about the mess. His brain finally clicked on and the first thing he thought of was 'Hedwig'. And as soon as he thought of her he somehow knew where to go.

"Oh, girl, I'm so sorry" he apologized.

The smallest bedroom smelled foul. Shed feathers and droppings were all over the cage and floor. “Hooo” Hedwig replied faintly, leaning against the bars.

“Easy, girl” he said gently. Harry was greatly alarmed when he went to stoke her chest and found no feathers. Hedwig had large patches of bare skin. Harry took the cage and carried it downstairs. In the kitchen, he pulled it apart and gently laid her on the table. He first dumped a package of bacon onto a frying pan and set it cooking, then he gave the sickly owl some water. He had to force feed the first couple of pieces of bacon to her. But slowly she ate on her own.

“Hoo” Hedwig finally protested turning away. Harry realized, just like himself, that she couldn’t really eat properly after being starved for two weeks. Some time later, while he was comforting Hedwig, Harry heard the heavy thumping of what must be either Uncle Vernon or Dudley tromping down the steps. Either way, he couldn’t possibly clean up fast enough, even if he felt like it.

“Wha’s burnin” he heard.

‘Definitely Uncle Vernon’ Harry thought. Then he heard a loud thump  
‘That would be the cupboard door’

“HARRRY POTTTER!!!” Vernon screamed as he stumbled into the kitchen.

“I hate you!!” Harry snarled. “I don’t care about me being locked up. But, what you did to Hedwig was sick!!”

Vernon Dursley regained his balance and shouted “How dare you speak to me like that?! That ruddy pigeon belongs to you! It’s not our problem if you don’t care for it!!”

“How the bloody hell was I supposed to do that locked up in that hole?!” Harry fired back. Uncle Vernon’s coloring went from red to purple and he approached Harry with clenched fists. In response, Harry grabbed the knife he was cutting bacon with “If you touch me or Hedwig again I’ll kill you!” he threatened.

“Y-you w-w-w-ouldn’t d-dare” his uncle stammered “That school will expel you and you’ll go to jail”

Harry pressed the knife against his belly “At this point, I don’t care, Uncle. Besides I’m not even using magic”

Vernon swallowed nervously and backed away. Harry kept the knife pointed at him and said “From now on, no more being your slave, no more locking me in that...that thing. And from now on I’ll have my wand on me ALL THE TIME!”

Harry took over the kitchen for the next couple of days until Hedwig recovered to the point where she was flying a little and they were both eating normally again. The Dursleys made a big show of eating out by getting all dressed up and making grand exits. While they were out, Harry realized he hadn’t gotten any letters from anyone. He dug through his books until he found Hermione’s phone number.

“Hello, Granger residence” the voice said.

“I-is Hermione there?” he asked hesitantly.

“This is she” the voice replied.

Harry blinked in surprise “Wow, Hermione, you sound different!” he exclaimed.

“Who is this?” she asked.

Harry chuckled slightly, the closest to a laugh he’d had in almost three weeks now “It’s Harry” he replied.

“What do you want?” asked Hermione in a cold tone.

Caught off guard, Harry stammered “Ahh...err...what do you mean? Umm...is something wrong?”

“Oh, not much. Just that you’ve ignored everything we’ve sent you.” She accused “Not just me, but Ron, Mr. Weasley, George, Fred, Mrs. Weasley ...Have I left anyone out?”

“Is it my turn to talk?” he shot back, angrily “From the day I got back to this miserable excuse for a family they’ve had me locked up and given me nothing but bread and water, that is when they remembered! So NO!! I haven’t seen any owls! And no, I couldn’t send any letters because Hedwig was half dead when I finally broke out!!” he slammed down the receiver furiously.

The next morning, Harry was in the Dursley’s kitchen, gently drying Hedwig off with a towel after giving her a bath when he heard a thump on the window. He looked out to find the Weasleys’ owl, Errol. Harry opened the window and took an envelope from his leg. Errol brushed up against Hedwig. He recognized Ron’s handwriting on the envelope. He still couldn’t believe they thought so little of him. He didn’t even open it. He grabbed some paper and wrote.

To Whoever,

Gee, it’s nice to have a great bunch of friends who ALWAYS BELIEVE IN ME!! Wish I knew the Howler charm

Harry

He wrapped it around the unopened letter, taped it shut and wrote ‘The Burrow’ on it and sent Errol off. After dinner, with a little encouragement, Harry had Hedwig hop onto his shoulder and took her to the park. “We’re gonna get you into the air again” he said encouragingly “You’ve gotta get your strength back” The bright, sunny day lifted some of the misery Harry was feeling.

At the park, Harry set Hedwig on the ground and encouraged her to fly. The first couple of times were failures. Harry brushed the dirt off and nudged at her to try again. The third time, she got into the air and hooted happily, circling above him. Harry spun around trying to follow her, he ended up getting dizzy and fell over. Hedwig landed beside him and nudged his side. Harry figured that meant she wanted him to get up. “Oh, I’m fine” he giggled “I’m just glad you are, too”

"Well, well, well look what it is" came the nasty voice of Piers Polkiss "Hey, Big D, it's that delinquent cousin of yours. And look at the ugly thing he has! Great chance to test my new bb gun"

Harry jumped up and stood protectively in front of his owl "Look who's talking about ugly. Don't even think about it Polkiss!" Harry snarled, then he turned to his cousin and taunted "Oooh everyone be scared of the Big D, especially ten year olds"

"Shut it Potter" Dudley grumbled

Harry grinned, nastily "Does Mummy know about your new name? I don't think so. She still calls him her Ickle Diddykins!" he teased.

"Watch it, Potter" said Dudley through clenched teeth.

"Ain't been Harry hunting in a long time" his friend Gordon commented

"I shot down a pigeon yesterday" Piers added "One on the ground should be a piece of cake."

Harry turned a furious look on him "I'm armed" Harry threatened "Duddykins knows, don't you...Piggy?"

"A...err...let's go find Evans...he owes me" a cringing Dudley suggested.

"Fine" Piers said as he pulled out his bb gun "But one...shot"

That was when the sky suddenly darkened and the temperature plummeted. A bolt of lightning struck the sliding board, blasting it off its mountings. "W-what a-a-are you d-d-doing P-p-potter?" Dudley stammered fearfully as his gang fled.

"This isn't me" replied Harry as he pulled his wand "It's much worse! Hedwig, fly away! Go get help! Professor Dumbledore or Sirius!!" After a brief rebellious look Hedwig took off. He pushed at Dudley and growled "I'm really tempted to just leave you, Dud, but if you value your life then run as fast as your lard arse will let you!" The boys

sprinted from the park all the way back to Privet Drive. Dudley, much to Harry's surprise, kept pace pretty well.

Dudley turned down an alley and Harry followed. Dudley grabbed him and slammed him into a wall "Stop what you're doing or I'll hit you!" Dudley threatened "I swear I will! I'll hit you!!"

"Shut up Dud---" Harry whispered harshly, but he was interrupted by a blinding flash of pain as Dudley's fist connected with the side of his head "YOU IDIOT!" he screamed as he fumbled around senselessly for his fallen wand. Desperately, he yelled "Accio!" and his wand snapped into his hand.

"Urrlll.....ahhhkkk" Dudley moaned in misery, then he ran.

Harry's eyes finally focused "NO! YOU'RE HEADING RIGHT FOR IT!!" he screamed "Expecto Patronum!" The white stag drove off the Dementor and vanished. Harry smiled faintly in relief, but then he felt an icy grip on his throat. ----

Move aside, silly girl he heard Bow to death, boy. Bow to Lord Voldemort --- Noooooo ---- and Harry's latest misery ---- Hermione's accusing voice You've ignored us.

"Expecto Patronum" Harry muttered. This produced a faint mist which was enough to cause the Dementor to flinch. Before it could get a solid grip again, Harry pulled away and roared "EXPECTO PATRONUM!!!" This time, Prongs didn't just absorb the attack. The Dementor fled, leaving bits of its foul smelling cloak behind. Harry reached for one, but it vanished in a puff of smoke. The second Dementor had grabbed Dudley and Harry heard the same sickening sucking sound he remembered from Sirius's brush with soullessness. Not knowing if it was even possible, Harry yelled "GET IT!!!"

Prongs turned and charged back past Harry and ferociously attacked the Dementor. It was almost too late, a little silvery ball had just appeared and was rising from Dudley's mouth. Prongs continued pursuing the hideous creature into the air. Both vanished in a flash of light. Harry thought Professor Dumbledore should know about that. Harry turned back to Dudley and watched, for the second time, a soul



returning to its body. Harry leaned over his cousin, who was curled up in a fetal position whimpering.

Mrs. Figg suddenly appeared, Harry groaned in annoyance "I don't have time for your stupid cats, you batty old hag!" he snapped, hiding his wand.

"Keep it out, you stupid boy!" she ordered "There could be more of those things! Ohh, wait till I see Mundungus!!" She helped Harry pull Dudley to his feet "Get your fat arse up, you useless lump" she grunted.

Harry summer just kept getting worse "You...you're a witch!" he said accusingly

"Squib, actually" replied Mrs. Figg "Told Dumbledore not to trust that good-for-nothing Mundungus Fletcher"

Harry already knew the answer to his next question "Living here long, have you, say thirteen years, maybe?"

"Why, yes" she replied "Dumbledore wanted me to make sure you're--"

"What? Safe?" Harry cut in angrily "Don't do your job very well, do you?"

Mrs. Figg drew herself up stiffly "Now, listen here---"

"Tell me, what have you been reporting since I got home?" Harry asked coldly.

As they were approaching #4, Mrs. Figg let go of Dudley who fell to the ground like a sack of potatoes "I don't care who you are, no child speaks to me like that!" she said, highly outraged.

"Fine, leave. Go play with your cats. Just stay away from me, you useless old bat" said Harry as he walked to the door. Harry watched the confrontation between Mrs. Figg and the Fletcher guy with bemusement. After Fletcher Disappeared Harry commented

sarcastically “Bit of a case of the pot calling the kettle black. You calling him useless, dont’cha think?”

Mrs. Figg’s response was an indignant huff as she stalked off.

Harry banged on the door, when Uncle Vernon opened it Harry stepped through and said “Carried that fat lump far enough. You can bring him in” Harry took the stairs two at a time to start packing.

“BOY, GET YOUR ROTTEN CARCASS DOWN HERE!!” Uncle Vernon yelled.

Harry got halfway down and asked “What?”

“Don’t take that tone with your uncle” Aunt Petunia scolded

“Never mind that now, Petunia” Vernon replied “What did you do to our son, freak?”

“Not much” Harry replied in a flat tone “Saved his worthless soul, is all. Now, if you don’t mind I’m busy” Harry was starting up the stairs again, when an owl flew through the window dropped a letter at Harry’s feet and departed. If Harry thought his summer could get no worse, he found out he was wrong. He had broken the law. He was expelled. His wand was to be destroyed. It only made him charge upstairs and redouble his packing efforts.

“GET BACK DOWN HERE, POTTER!” Uncle Vernon yelled.

Harry continued packing “REALLY TOO BUSY JUST NOW!!” he screamed back

“I DEMAND YOU EXPLAIN THIS LETTER, NOW!!!”

Harry rolled his eyes “Bloody Idiot!” he cursed himself. He’d dropped the Ministry letter and his uncle read it. Harry finished pack before heading downstairs. He carried Hedwig’s now shiny cage and dragged his school trunk, thumping down the steps behind him.

“What’s this about, then?” Uncle Vernon demanded

Harry shrugged "Voldemort's back, you remember him, he was the one that killed my parents in that car accident to lied to me about. It was probably him that sent the Dementors here. As for me getting expelled, well it wouldn't have happened if it weren't the lump over there."

"You really mean it?" a stricken Aunt Petunia asked.

Harry turned on her "Since when do you care? I thought you were glad your freak sister was dead!"

"How dare you!" she yelled, her hand was raised to hit him.

Harry whipped out his wand. Petunia froze. "I learned a new curse, thanks to him. Hurts too, wanna taste?" he threatened.

"So, lets see" Vernon said in his most rational voice all day "One of your kind is trying to kill you, right?" To which Harry nodded. "Well there's only one thing for it, then" Vernon continued "Obviously you're putting our family in danger, so you need to get out"

"Quite the brave one aren't you, Uncle Vernon" Harry sneered "Ah, well. I was planning on it anyway"

"Well, then" Uncle Vernon, blustered "What's taking so long?"

"You keep interrupting my packing" Harry shot back

"Get on with it, then!" Vernon ordered

Harry was starting up the steps when another owl arrived. This envelope was red. Harry couldn't help cringing. But, instead of going to him, it when to Aunt Petunia. She looked at it like it was going to attack her. Harry knew, in this case, she was actually right. "Its called a Howler, I'll hear it anyway. You may as well open it"

Aunt Petunia shook her head fearfully.

"If you don't it'll be a lot worse. Probably blast out the windows." Harry said, enjoying the Dursley's discomfort.

Aunt Petunia reluctantly complied. You, stay put. Harry. It said in Dumbledore's voice. Then it turned to her and roared REMEMBER MY LAST!! Then it disintegrated with a loud bang. Harry's fury at the headmaster moved down a notch.

"The boy must stay, Vernon." She said, then to Harry she added "Upstairs with you, boy"

The pasty white look on Aunt Petunia's face was just enough to get Harry to back down from walking out of the house "If you even think about locking me in there, I'll blast that door to sawdust and melt the locks!" he threatened. The next couple of days were frustrating. Privet Dr. was in a state of armed truce. Harry brandished his wand any time he was in his relatives' presence. He ate with one Hogwarts text or another at every meal. If he was in his room, he would leave the door open. He would only close it himself when he went to bed.

Dudley recovered after sleeping the entire day after the Dementor attack. He still didn't have much of an appetite though. "Not a bad thing" Harry never said out loud.

Two days later, the Dursleys went on a trip. Of course, Harry wasn't invited. Which was just fine with him, he wasn't interested in watching the Dursleys get an award for his gardening work. Just before dark he heard someone enter the house. His hand found his wand in the blink of an eye.

"Where is he, do you think?" he heard someone whisper.

This was the first time Harry regretting leaving the bedroom door open.

"Upstairs makes the most sense" another voice said.

Harry knew he was outnumbered and trapped. He screamed and charged into the hallway, crashing into someone. He grabbed a fistful

of robe, slammed him to the ground and pounced, pinning him to the floor. "Get out of here!" he growled

"Let'er go, Potter!" we're on your side.

Harry hesitated for a moment "Professor Moody?" he asked.

"HA!" was the throaty laugh "Didn't teach much. Now, get off her. We're here to take you---"

"No!" Harry cut him off suspiciously.

Another person in the shadows said "Perhaps a little light would help. Lumos."

"Professor Lupin?" he asked, feeling a little better

"And I'm an Auror and a woman, who'd rather not have her boobs bruised, if you don't mind" the third member of the group said.

Harry blushed brightly and jumped up "Err...sorry..." he said.

"Merlin, Harry, guess I could turn off my wand" Remus chuckled

"Sorry ...ah...miss" Harry repeated.

Mad-Eye laughed "Nonsense Potter! Excellent move, always remember, CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" he turned to the woman and said "And you Miss Tonks need a review of the procedures for entering darkened houses."

"Sorry bout that..." Harry apologized again "...uh...ma'am...ahh, hi, I'm Harry Potter."

Remus introduced her as Nymphadora Tonks, eliciting a growling protest.

"Wotcher, Harry" she said.

"So, where're we going, the Burrow?" asked Harry.

Misinterpreting Harry's question Remus answered "I imagine you'd like to, but we needed someplace with extra protections. Not to worry, though. I imagine you'll be pleased with what we've arranged."

"Wouldn't mind fewer redheads right now" grumbled Harry.

Remus gave him a confused look and asked "Something the matter?"

"All ready, then?" Mad-Eye asked, effectively ending the conversation. They took off on brooms, landing about a half hour later on a gloomy street. "Read this and memorize it Potter" he ordered "Now think about what you read"

Harry saw a house appear in the formerly empty space between #11 and #13 "Wicked!" he exclaimed. The inside was dank, dreary and dark. The first person he saw was Mrs. Weasley. "Hello" he said, emotionlessly.

"Oh, Harry dear" she gushed as usual. She wrapped her arms around him "Dinner should be ready in an hour. You can wait with Ron, Hermione and Ginny---" she broke off when she noticed Harry's stiff posture.

"I'd rather sleep" he said "Where can I go that they won't be?"

Mrs. Weasley's smile dropped off "If that's what you want, dear" she said. She led him to the living room. "Would it be alright if I let them know you were here at least?"

"I guess" replied Harry, bitterly "Oh and tell Hermione I said thanks for the lovely phone call and ask the rest if they remembered what happened the summer before Second Year." Harry had worked that out during the days between the Dementor attack and his finally leaving Privet Drive.

"Arf! ARF!!" and slobbering dog kiss finally woke Harry.

He scratched the dog behind its ears and said "Good to see ya Padfoot. But what're you doin'here"

"This is my family's home" replied Sirius when he returned to his human form "You look pretty good for what you've been through, Harry. I'm sorry I couldn't've helped. Got a half a mind to do what they accused me of. Stinking Muggles!"

Harry shook his head violently, saying "No way! Sirius! You can't! You're the only family I got!"

"Calm down, Harry" his Godfather said gently "Being tempted and actually doing it are two different things. Might turn your uncle's car neon pink though.

Harry cracked up "Now there's a good one!!

"Now there's what I wanted to see" Sirius said "Now, Harry, I'd like you to tell me what's going on between you and your friends"

Harry folded his arms angrily and said "Guess they've been bad-mouthing me all month, right?"

"Well, actually, I've only been back a couple of days" Sirius answered "and all I've heard is how bad they feel. You know they sent a bunch of letters the last few days. They're worried about you"

Harry gave a disgusted snort and said "I don't supposed they told you about how I was locked in a cupboard for two weeks, or that when I finally got out, all they wanted to do was accuse me of ignoring them!! Or that Hedwig was almost dead!!!"

"Easy Harry" Sirius said calmly "I'm on your side, but, can I ask what you're gonna do next?" Harry shrugged, Sirius continued "Well I'd say you have it out before bad blood starts to form. James and I both had short tempers. We'd blow up at each other, then a half hour later, we'd be scheming our next prank with Peter and Remus."

"How can you even talk about him?" Harry asked.

"Who, Peter?" asked Sirius "Its complicated. I guess I think of him as two different people. There's the boy that was part of the gang. One

of my best friends. But now there's this man who betrayed us. Got your parents murdered, landed me in Azkaban. I don't know if you were right to stop us from killing him in the Shack. But, if I see him again...after what happened, especially to you...I'll kill him. Does that make sense?"

Harry smirked and replied "Yes and no"

"Exactly how I feel about it" said Sirius through a barking laugh  
"Ready to face the world?"

Harry shrugged "Not really, but I'm starved"  
Next Chapter Title----Ruptured Relationships.

And, though it doesn't fit the tone of the chapter----Merry (or for the Brits in the crowd) Happy Christmas



## Ruptured Relationships

“Harry!” exclaimed Hermione, as he and Sirius entered the kitchen. She threw her arms around him “Oh...I’m so sorry”

“GET—OFF—ME” Harry snarled. He shoved her away. Only catching herself on the table kept her on her feet. Into the shocked silence Harry asked “Where’s Hedwig?”

Ron answered “She’s in our room, mate”

“You a part of this whole hate Harry thing, too?” he asked coldly.

Ron flinched, he stammered and stuttered “Well...it didn’t start...errr...well what I mean...that is---”

“Shut up, Ron!” Harry cut him off “Sirius, are there more rooms in this house?”

Sirius, looking sad, replied “Yeah, Harry. You sure that’s what you want?”

Harry gave a terse nod.

“Alright. Kreacher! KREACHER!” he called out.

An ancient elf appeared “Traitorous Master called Kreacher. Kreacher must obey. What is it be wanting?”

“Go clean out another room” Sirius ordered “Well! You have your orders! Get about it!”

“Disgraceful! The Mistress cast it out, now Kreacher must obey Blood Traitors and Mudbloods” the elf muttered, then vanished.

In the wake of Kreacher’s disappearance, Ginny approached and took Harry’s hand “Its all my fault, Harry” she said “Please don’t be mad at Ron and Hermione. I was the first one to wonder if----”

“Why!?” Harry yelled. He yanked his hand away from her and slumped into a chair.

She rubbed his shoulder, saying “I dunno, I guess I thought you wanted to forget about me, I---”

“We were together all second term. I’d a given anything to be here than with the...the sodding Dursleys. Couldn’t you believe in me...even a little?” he asked miserably, then he slapped Ginny’s hand away. She ran out in tears. “I don’t much feel like eating anymore” Harry said bitterly “What’s been going on with Voldemort?”

Before anyone could reply, Fred and George apparated from upstairs “Honestly, you two” Mrs. Weasley scolded “There is just no reason for you to apparate between floors”

“Practice, Mum, practice” George said cheerily.

“So, dinner ready?” Fred asked “Something wrong with Ginny?”

“Mind your own business!” Harry snapped

“Harry, there’s no reason for you to be worried about You-Know-Who” Mr. Weasley cut in.

“Quite so, dear” said Fred, imitating his mother’s mannerisms, if not her voice, very well “He’s entirely too young”

Harry almost laughed at that, but withheld commenting. He wasn’t sure how or if the twins were involved in the whole mess this past month.

George bowed to his brother and added “Never mind he actually dueled him”

“Knock it off, you two” Mrs. Weasley ordered “This isn’t your decision to make. Don’t forget what Dumbledore told us?”

“What might that be, Molly?” Sirius asked.

“The part about not telling Harry more than he needs to know!” Mrs. Weasley shot back, her face was getting red.

“And who makes that decision, Mrs. Weasley?” Harry asked, rather sarcastically.

Her eyes widened in surprise “That’s for the adults in your life to decide, Harry. Especially Professor Dumbledore.”

“Don’t think much of Dumbledore at the moment” Harry fired back.

“And what, pray tell, is that supposed to mean young man?” Molly demanded, angrily.

Harry might normally have been scared of her expression, but his argument with Ginny, Hermione and Ron had pushed him too far “He’s had that useless idiot Figg, spying on me from day one! Never once did she bother telling him how the Dursleys treated me like a slave!! And did he ever bother to look in himself?! NO!!!”

“I’m sure that, if he’d known---”

Harry cut her off angrily “And what about this summer?!” he glared at Ron and Hermione “OH, right, I forgot! My so-called best friends thought I was tossing them off!! I was too busy starving to death!!” That drove Ron and Hermione out of the room.

“Harry’s entitled to know a lot more than he does!” Sirius added “Dumbledore thinks he shouldn’t even know what he already does!”

“Then it’s a good thing you’re not in a position to decide that!” Mrs. Weasley fired back

Sirius slammed his fist on the table “I’m his Godfather that gives me the right!!” he gritted out between clenched teeth.

Mrs. Weasley sneered at him “Hard to look after a child while being locked up in Azkaban, isn’t it?”

“THAT’S NOT FAIR!!” Harry screamed and Sirius was more than half out of his seat.

Lupin finally cut in calmly “Sirius, sit down. Harry, this isn’t your argument.”

Harry gave angry looks to both Remus and Mrs. Weasley.

“And I think that Harry should have some say in this” Lupin finished

Harry dove at the opportunity “I want to know!” he said “Why’d Voldemort kill my parents? Why’s he after me? What’s he doing now?!?”

“Do you see Molly?” asked Sirius “No child could have put it that plainly”

Harry crossed his arms and directed a dirty look at Sirius “Great” he said bitterly “Can we stop talking about me and start answering me?”

“Alright Harry” Sirius said, “You’ll have to understand that we don’t have all the answers but a few of us know a piece of a prophecy that talks about a person with the power to defeat The Dark Lord, meaning Voldemort. Fourteen years ago, Voldemort decided you fit the description. I don’t know why.” He looked at the room, receiving headshakes.

Remus picked up the narration “We didn’t know it at the time, but Wormtail betrayed their hiding place to his master, breaking the Fidelus Charm. Voldemort wasn’t particularly interested in killing James and Lily that night----”

“He was after me, wasn’t he?” Harry concluded

Sirius squeezed Harry’s shoulder, sympathetically and said “Harry, you do understand there was nothing you could do about it, right?” Harry just shrugged

“So, whether it’s a matter of revenge for what happened then, or this prophecy. I’m afraid you’re a target” Remus concluded.

Harry felt a cold hate build in him that he hadn't felt in over a year. He knew exactly where it came from "Sirius, do you remember when I first saw you in the Shrieking Shack. Up til then I thought it was you who betrayed my parents."

"Understandable, considering" Sirius replied.

"Well I don't remember if I apologized for it" Harry added "But, why not just let Voldemort find me. Right now, I wouldn't mind another----"

That brought shrieks of outrage from everyone in the room "WALKING INTO----TOO YOUNG----OVER MY DEAD BODY" was all jumbled together in various voices.

"SHUT UP, EVERYONE!!" Sirius bellowed, then silence achieved, he addressed Harry quietly gripping his shoulders "Listen to me Harry. Coming after me was one thing...not really bright, either, given you knew nothing about me at the time. Frankly, I doubt I'd last more than a few minutes against Voldemort in a fight. You did great in that graveyard, never doubt that. But that was a brief encounter. And he let his ego get in the way with that stupid 'He's all mine garbage'

After learning all he never wanted to know about Voldemort, Harry was exhausted. "I'm going to bed" he declared "Uhh...thanks for dinner, Mrs. Weasley."

"I'll show you to your room" Sirius offered.

Harry allowed himself to be led upstairs "Sirius, I---" he began, only to be interrupted by a yawn.

"No more talk tonight, Harry" his godfather said, sternly "In bed, now"

Harry stuck like glue to Sirius for the next couple of days. He commented that the Blacks weren't exactly the nicest bunch of people. (Present company excepted) To which Sirius laughed. Harry laughed in return. Spotting Hermione in the doorway caused his momentary good mood to drop away. He frowned and she vanished. "I wish they'd get it!" Harry snapped.

"A change of plan for tomorrow, Harry" said Sirius, coming to a decision "Dumbledore gave me a mission for the Order. Shouldn't take more than a few hours, so I'll be away. Sorry to spring this on you at the last minute"

Harry gave a listless shrug "It's ok" he said "I'll find something to do."

"Maybe you could start letting your friends back in, again" Sirius said, gently "Personally, I'd start with Ginny. Highly snoggable, that one...ahh...if I were just twenty years yo---"

Sirius got elbowed in his ribs "Really not an image I needed!" Harry exclaimed.

"Ok, I'll give you that" Sirius said with a leer "Though there was this girl I went to school with. Very nice curves, played the field a bit. Definite above average snogger"

"And?" Harry asked suspiciously.

Sirius shrugged "Eh...nothing really to tell. Did I mention red hair? She married, had a kid. Not as handsome, mind you, if she'd married me, but he's---- HEY!!!"

"Mangy mutt!" Harry yelled, pouncing on his godfather with a pillow. Sirius, now equally armed struck back.

The noise quickly drew Mrs. Weasley ranting and raving "HARRY POTTER YOU'RE ENTIRELY TOO OLD TO---!!"

"He started it!!" Harry yelled, hitting Sirius right over the head. His pillow exploded in feathers.

Mrs. Weasley was even more angry to see Harry's opponent "SIRIUS BLACK" she roared "STOP THIS IMMEDIATELY!!! WHAT KIND OF EXAMPLE---"

"All in fun Molly!" Sirius shouted.

“HMMPH” she grunted “I think you should both clean this disaster up. That means no magic” with that she stormed off.

Still in the middle of a laughing fit, Harry asked “Where’s your wand Sirius?”

“No way!” Sirius giggled back “She looked quite scary”

Harry could only agree, as for working though, he said “Well have fun then” and started to leave.

“Get back here! I’m not cleaning this up all by myself!!” Sirius exclaimed

Harry put a hand beside his mouth and fake yelled “Ohhhh, Mrs. Weasley, guess what Sirius said about your daughter!!!!”

“You would!” Sirius gaped at him.

Drawn by the commotion Ginny appeared “What’s going on?” she asked “Ahh---chooo” complements of the feathers, then her head hung “Hi Harry” She disappeared from sight.

“Go on, Harry, I consider myself blackmailed” Sirius urged.

Harry gave a faint smile and nodded “Gin, hold up!” he called.

“I’m so sorry Harry---I-I” she sniffled, not looking up.

Ginny looked rather pale “Are you alright?” he asked, concerned

“I’m fine” she said

“Gin, look at me...You’ve been crying---a lot” he observed.

She just nodded.

“Because of me?” he asked.

Ginny sobbed "Of course, Harry...I...we've...missed you. Even you being here, you're not. Ron and Hermione hoped you'd at least watch the chess game yesterday. And the three of us so wanted you to join when we were tossing the quaffle around, this morning."

"Sirius hasn't been very subtle either" Harry said "That's what started the pillow fight"

"Oh?" she inquired, hoping to continue the conversation.

Harry nodded, looking embarrassed "Errr...yeah...he said you're...ahh...highly snuggable" he replied.

"No, thanks" Ginny said lightly "Don't much care for beards. Wonder what Mum would think..."

Harry laughed a little and asked "Why do you think he's cleaning up the pillow fight?"

"Ahh, blackmail, good one" she giggled "Ummm...Harry, does this mean...errr...are we ok?"

Hesitating, Harry replied "Well...I want to be"

Ginny hugged him.

"That's a good way to start" he said with a smile "Guess, Ron and Hermione are next...The truth is I'm gonna have a harder time with her than anyone."

"How come?" she asked.

"The phone call" he explained. They found Ron and Hermione in the kitchen, playing chess.

They both jumped up when he entered and exclaimed "Harry!"

"Yeah" he said "look all three of you have apologized a hundred times. Apology accepted."



Hermione bear-hugged him and said "Oh! Harry I'm sooo sorry!"

"Hermione look, I'm not at that point yet" he said, making no effort to return it.

Sobbing, she released him "I-I und-und-und-ders-s-s-stand" she blubbered.

"Be nice to have things back to normal, Harry" said Ron, offering a hand.

Harry took it "The truth is I've been pretty lonely. I've got one condition, though."

"Anything, Harry" they all said.

"I want to tell you everything that happened this past month" he said.  
"Actually, I wish I had a pensieve so you could see it---"

Hermione's eyes almost popped out of her head "Harry!" she exclaimed "They're so rare, so valuable! How did---"

"Dumbledore has one" he grumbled "And can we stay on topic, please?"

It took considerable effort, but she nodded "OK, sorry Harry" she said

"Well, it started before we were even out of King's Cross" he began  
"Remember that goodbye kiss---"

Ron groaned "Rather not, mate. Turns my stomach. YEOW! OUCH!"

"Something wrong?" Harry asked.

Glaring at Hermione and Ginny, Ron replied "Err...no. Sorry for interrupting" He was reaching down and rubbing his legs under the table.

"OK, as I was saying. Hermione hugged me and kissed my cheek. Ginny's kiss, well, that one was....ahhh....more. Dudley, my cousin,

he...ummm...well...askedhowmuchIwaspaying” Harry explained, the last bit coming out in a rush.

Ron turned bright red “WHAT!! I’ll banish him to Mars!” he yelled.

“Well, I had my wand in my trunk, so I punched him in the stomach as hard as I could” Harry explained “Dropped him like a ton of bricks. Then, back at Privet Dr. I went upstairs to put my trunk away. Ten minutes later, Uncle Vernon slammed the door open, pushed me down the stairs and locked me in the cupboard just like before I started at Hogwarts. I was locked in there for the entire next two weeks----”

On the other side of the door, Mrs. Weasley and Sirius were listening to Harry talk. She wanted desperately to rush in to comfort him. But, Sirius stopped her “Leave it to them” he whispered “He’ll just clam up the minute one of us goes in there. One thing I plan is to make sure Harry never has to go near them again. I don’t care what Dumbledore says. All three of them should be in Azkaban.”

“In that, we fully agree” Mrs. Weasley promised.

By the time Harry finished his story they were all in tears “Wish Mum would stop with the onions” Ron complained wiping at his face.

“Oh, I wish you’d just admit it Ronald” Mrs. Weasley whispered tartly.

Sirius, whose fury had been mounting by the second, gave a short barking laugh at that “You should know teenage boys never cry, Molly”

“It sounds like he’s finishing.” Mrs. Weasley observed “Let’s go”

Ginny was the first to speak when Harry finished “That’s just plain...I mean how could they! ERRR! They should be under a bat-bogey hex for the rest of their rotten lives!!! I’m sorry you went through that, Harry and I’m sorry---”

"I said I accept, no more apologies" Harry said, giving her hand a firm squeeze. "Let's just put it behind us. So, who's winning here?" referring to the Chess game.

Hermione let out a frustrated sigh "Ron says I'm six moves from being checkmated, but I don't see it."

"That's why I'll win" said Ron smugly.

"If you would just spend half the time you spend on Quidditch and Chess---"

Harry giggled, looking at Ginny "Still at it, I see" he commented.

"Never ends" she replied in a suffering tone. Then she whispered in his ear.

Harry tingled a little at that, but then he cracked up at her words "Ya think?" he asked

"Bet'cha a Galleon" Ginny replied

"WHAT?!" Ron and Hermione asked at the same time.

Harry and Ginny both just shrugged.

"Ahh...Harry" Hermione asked "Are you worried about the trial?"

Harry cringed, in his anger with his friends he'd honestly forgotten about it. Now it was back in his face "Terrified, to be honest. I can't imagine not going back to Hogwarts" he said

"It'll be alright, mate" said Ron reassuringly. Hermione nodded and Ginny leaned against him and started petting his arm.

"Hope so" Harry said.

During Sirius' absence, the rifts were mostly healed. Chess and Quidditch pretty much took care of Ron. Snogging and Harry's hormones went a long way with Ginny. Harry was still having trouble

around Hermione right up until the day of his trial before the Wizengamot. Every time they talked, her accusation over the phone would echo in his mind.

"I think you should turn in early, tonight, Harry" Mrs. Weasley said, shortly after dinner.

Sirius, who'd returned from an Order mission that afternoon, agreed "Yeah, I don't know much about trials. But I'm pretty sure yawning in court doesn't win you points with the judges"

"Awright" Harry muttered "Lemme just finish beating Ron. I actually got him this time."

That comment brought a lot of attention. Ron was down three pawns and a rook. He was frowning in deep thought. Ginny ran upstairs and the twins popped in to see history in the making. A half an hour and only three moves later, Harry had traded two pawns for Ron's other rook. "Bye, bye, Harry" said Ron with a sudden smirk.

"Great Merlin" Ginny moaned as the massacre started.

A horror-struck Harry could only move his hapless king out of check over and over each time over the next six moves as Ron's two knights and queen stomped all over his defenses claiming one piece after another. All Harry got in return was one of the knights, but at the cost of his queen. The deathblow came when Ron landed a pawn on Harry's back row, which morphed into a second queen.

"Checkmate" Ron said quietly as he slid his original queen right next to Harry's king.

"Somehow a trial seems like a piece of cake after that" a completely stunned Harry said "Mrs. Weasley you're right. G'night, all. Ahhh....nice....ummm...game Ron."

Ron, looking highly pleased with himself, said "You too, mate. And try not to worry about tomorrow"

"Tuck me in, Gin?" asked Harry in a flirtatious tone.

Ginny pretended not to notice “Ehhh” she shrugged “Ain’t you old enough to do that on your own?”

“Ahhh...Harry? Can we talk...just you and me?” asked Hermione “You mind, Ginny?”

After a glance at Ginny, Harry said “Sure, come on”

“Harry, I don’t want to get you upset or anything---” she began, once they were alone.

“But, you’re wondering why I’m more okay with Ron and Ginny, than you?” he finished.

Hermione nodded, quite surprised he’d read that so well “Yeah” was all she managed to say.

“It’s like this” he explained “I really don’t know what you guys were saying back and forth, and at this point I don’t want to. But, what it is, is, it was you on the other end of the phone.”

Hermione suppressed sob and said “I’m soo sorry about that Harry. I wish I’d never picked up the phone that day. I wish...I mean I want us to be back the way we were. Tell me what to do, Harry! I’ll do anything!”

“Not crying would be nice. You know I’m rubbish with that stuff” he replied. He squeezed her arm and added “I care about you, Hermione, just as much as Ginny and Ron. Just give me a little extra time, OK?”

Hermione’s eyes still watered “Sure, Harry” she said. Then, patting his hand, she turned to leave.

“Hey” he said, before she left “Careful saying you’ll do anything, right”

Hermione looked back confused and questioned “Huh? Wyzzat?”

“If I wasn’t with Ginny, I mighta asked for a snog or two” he joked.

Her jaw dropped, her cheeks turned red “Harrryyyyyy!” she squealed. Half surprised, half embarrassed and half flattered, she skipped out of the room. Heading toward her room, she never saw Ginny.

Harry woke feeling quite blissful. He had never gotten a chance to ask Ginny exactly what brought on the amorous activities of the night before. But, he would the minute he got a chance. His boxers tented up as he relived that memory.

“Up and at’em, Harry!!” came Mrs. Weasley’s voice, followed by a knocking on the door “You’ve got a busy day today!!”

Harry groaned “I’m awake”

“I put out some clothes by the bathroom for you!” she yelled “Better move it, the hearing is in two hours!!”

“Thank you!” Harry called back. Images of Ginny rushed out of his head. Being reminded of the trial probably would have done it by itself. Hearing Mrs. Weasley’s voice, on top of it, just killed the whole thought completely. “Talk about bad timing” he muttered

“Did you say something, dear?” she asked.

Harry rolled his eyes “Just wondering about the trial, Mrs. Weasley.”

“No point worrying, breakfast is already started” she replied.

After showering and dressing, Harry made his way to the kitchen. Ginny’s back was to him when he entered. Feeling playful he covered her eyes “Guess who!” he said

“Hmmm, its not Sirius...” she commented “...could be Bill”

Harry tilted the chair back and kissed her “That help any?” he asked.

“HAGRID!” Ginny declared.

Harry attacked her ribs causing her to squeal with laughter “Thought you didn’t like beards” he commented as he flopped down beside her.

“Are you quite done groping my sister?” Ron complained.

Mrs. Weasley glared at him “RONALD WEASLEY! APOLOGIZE AT ONCE!” she screeched “That was perfectly harmless! And completely unfair to both of them!!”

“Err...sorry” said Ron, begrudgingly.

“You know, Ron, you’d be a lot better off getting a nice girl of your own instead of worrying about Harry and Ginny” Sirius offered.

Harry was too busy inhaling a plateful of bacon, eggs and toast to comment. But, he noticed a blush creep across Hermione’s face. And that Sirius had cast his eyes toward her. Ron just grunted and scowled at Sirius.

“Finish up, Harry. Its time to go” Mr. Weasley said.

Harry looked at the clock, it read 8:20 “Its not til ten” he pointed out.

“I realize that, Harry” he answered “But in light of the charge against you. It would be best if we traveled by non-magical means. So we’re taking those Muggle trains to the Ministry, what are they called...so fascinating”

“The Underground” Harry explained.

Mr. Weasley nodded, then asked “Why are they called that?”

“Well...because they move through tunnels that are underneath the city” Harry explained. He’d thought that was obvious.

“Fascinating, fascinating” Mr. Weasley said “And what---”

Mrs. Weasley cut him off “Arthur, I imagine you can ask plenty of questions during the trip. I’m sure Harry would much rather have a round of farewells. Good luck Harry” she concluded, hugging Harry.

“Thanks, Mrs. Weasley” he replied, returning the hug.

Fred and George were next “In case things go bad” they said

“...we’ve got a”

“Dungbomb for you...”

“...To set off”

“on the stinkers---”

“Most definitely NOT!” Mrs. Weasley declared, “Give me that, and off to your room!!”

The twins popped out of the kitchen. Mrs. Weasley pointed her wand at the little brown ball and it vanished. Seconds later, there was a muffled Boom.

“MUUUUUUMMM!” came two shocked yells.

Mrs. Weasley displayed a wicked grin and yelled back “KEEP THAT DOOR CLOSED! AND, NO, YOU CANNOT OPEN THE WINDOW EITHER!!”

“It’ll be fine, mate” Ron said, gripping Harry’s shoulder “But, good luck anyway”

“You know I wish I could be there” said Sirius

Harry nodded “Yeah, but its not a good idea” he said, wrapping his arms around his Godfather’s waist.

“Alright, save some of that for the girls” Sirius joked.

Hermione put her arms around his neck and said “You’ve really got the law on your side in this. You’re allowed to use magic in self-defense. Besides, the only Muggle who saw it was your cousin”

“I know, but thanks” Harry said giving her waist a gentle squeeze. Then he turned to Ginny, he hadn’t seen the frown she quickly hid.



“Right now, I feel like I could take on the world” he whispered in her ear. His lips slid across her cheek to her mouth.

A nudge from Mr. Weasley broke the kiss “We’ll have a party all set for you when you get back, Harry” Ginny said.

The Underground was an uneasy trip for Harry. He did his best to answer all of Mr. Weasley’s questions, but he felt that his fascination with all things Muggle was creating a scene. There were several passengers eyeing the pair curiously, but thankfully there were no incidences. Harry guessed they assumed at least Mr. Weasley was a tourist.

Upon entering the Ministry, the situation was reversed Mr. Weasley had to drag the awestruck Harry along “Keep moving, Harry” he insisted “I’ll be glad to give you a tour AFTER the hearing” Four different times, Harry bounced off a pillar or a person because he wasn’t watching where he was going.

“You’re late!” a cold voice informed Harry on entering the courtroom.

Harry flinched “Err...sorry. I didn’t know the location was changed”

“This may not be looked upon favorably by the court” the same voice said. The man was Minister Fudge “Now that you are here...finally...let us begin”

“I’ve been looking forward to your explanation as to why a simple thing like this required the attention of the entire Wizengamot, Minister” a monacled woman commented.

Harry was awed and intimidated by the presence of forty unhappy looking witches and wizards. His confidence evaporated.

“Disciplinary Hearing, Twelfth of August” said Fudge in a ringing voice, the scratching in the room was Percy taking notes “into offences committed under the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery and the International Statute of Secrecy by Harry James Potter, resident at Number Four Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey. Interrogators, Cornelius Oswald Fudge, Minister of Magic:

Amelia Susan Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement: Delores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister: Court Scribe, Percival Ignatius Weasley---

OOTP pg 138

From the end of Fourth Year, Harry knew the Minister no longer liked him. He got a bad vibe from Umbridge but he wasn't quite sure why. He suddenly hoped that Susan Bones had said something nice about him. It had to be a good thing that Amelia Susan Bones was annoyed with Fudge.

“---Witness for the Defense: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore” came from behind Harry

OOTP pg 139

Harry spun around in his chair---Someone on my side---he thought. But, Dumbledore didn't even look at him during the whole hearing. Mrs. Figg's testimony was very helpful. He nodded his thanks to her, but she gave him a contemptuous look as she walked past Harry. He returned it. ---She owed him an apology---he figured ---For that matter so did Dumbledore for sticking him with the Dursleys.

Dumbledore and Fudge argued back and forth way over Harry's head over subjects he didn't know anything about. As frustrated as he was with Dumbledore, Harry loved watching him make Fudge's face turn various shades of red. “And since when is the full Wizengamot called in to conduct a criminal trial on a simple matter of underage wizardry?” asked Dumbledore.

“This boy has been flaunting our laws for years!!” Fudge screeched.

Very calmly, Dumbledore replied “Hmmm, that's odd. As Headmaster I would be made aware of any previous charges filed against any student. I admit I don't have the school records at hand. Perhaps you could refresh my memory, Minister”

“August previous!” Fudge declared triumphantly “The accused blew up his Muggle aunt causing her to float over the city”

“She’s not really my aunt!!” Harry protested.

Dumbledore nodded condescendingly and said “Yes, Minister, I am aware of that incident. However, no charges resulted from that. I am sure Harry appreciates your consideration in that case.”

“And the Hover Charm three years ago---“ Fudge mentioned.

Harry angrily cut him off “Dobby did that!”

“What is a Dobby, Potter?” Fudge asked coldly.

Dumbledore coughed “Pardon, but if I may, Dobby is a house-elf current on staff at Hogwarts. Perhaps the court would bene---”

“NO!” Fudge shouted, furiously “This boy’s pattern of misuse of magic is endless! It even goes back to the apparent Apparation incident in 1988!!”

Harry was furious at that---They’ve known all along about how the Dursleys treat him!---He gave Dumbledore a nasty look, but was ignored.

“That is irrelevant, Cornelius” the headmaster said “As you’re aware, no law exists regarding accidental magic performed by Muggle raised children”

“Need I remind you that Potter is not Muggleborn?” Fudge pointed out, as if he’d made a major point.

Dumbledore nodded as if acknowledging the point, but said “I believe you didn’t hear me correctly, Minister. I did not say Harry was Muggleborn...as, for example some of those in attendance today are...I stated that Harry was raised by Muggles---”

“If you could call it that” said Harry, resentfully

Dumbledore talked right over Harry “Regardless, the outcome is the same. And even children raised in Magical homes do not have pre-

Hogwarts accidental magic held against them. Nor, is it relevant in this case. There is only one charge against him.”

“Has the accused anything to add?” asked Madam Bones.

Harry had no idea what he might have said, but Dumbledore was apparently satisfied. Despite his frustration with the headmaster, he couldn’t think of anything else so he replied “No, ma’am”

“Not guilty?” asked Madam Bones ----then---- “Guilty?” ----finally----  
“Twenty-four to nine with seven abstentions the case is dismissed.”

“Court adjourned!” Fudge snarled.

Dumbledore turned to leave, Harry tried to stop him “Professor! I need...to.....speak...” his voice trailed off as the door closed behind the headmaster. “Bloody idiot!” he cursed, kicking the wall.

“And what, pray tell, did the wall do to you?” a stern voice asked.

Harry jumped, highly startled and turned “Sorry! Nothing!” he exclaimed.

“Oh, I’m sure you didn’t break it, Harry” Madam Bones replied lightly  
“Forgive me for startling you. I wonder if we could talk for a bit.”

Harry hesitated before replying “Err...I’m not sure...I mean. I came with Mr. Weasley”

“Not to worry, Mr. Weasley is part of my department.” She replied.

Harry waited with Madam Bones as the Wizengamot members filed out of the courtroom. He thanked as many of them as he could as they passed. Many, even the ones he knew voted not guilty, were frowning.

“Amelia, good morning. Harry, what happened?!” an anxious Mr. Weasley asked. “Dumbledore didn’t say.”

Harry grinned broadly announcing “Not Guilty!”

“Excellent!” Mr. Weasley exclaimed “Just excellent! Not that I had any doubt, of course. But still, I couldn’t help but be---Harry I can’t believe they brought in the whole court for this.”

Madam Bones had an unpleasant look as she said “I think that should be investigated. Even considering Harry’s unusual position in our world, this really didn’t warrant the attention of the full Wizengamot.”

“Err...sorry” Harry apologized.

“You didn’t do anything wrong” Madam Bones said “Rather, I’m questioning the behavior of our ---er--- leader ---- in this. For example...” she pointed at where Fudge was talking to Lucius Malfoy.

Fudge gave a half bow and vanished. Mr. Malfoy headed for the group “Ahh...my dear Amelia, always a pleasure to see you.” He greeted her with an outstretched hand and a tip of his hat.

“That’s Madam Bones, Mr. Malfoy” she replied stiffly. She made no effort to return the man’s gesture. “Is there something I can do for you?”

Lucius shifted to turning a cold look at Harry “It’s so nice to see, once again, the boy hero getting out of a tight spot. Almost snakelike you might say.” He sneered.

“Don’t talk to me, Malfoy!” Harry shot back.

“Above showing proper respect for your betters, boy” Lucius accused.

Harry barely held his temper. He hated being called ‘boy’ with a passion “NO Death Eater is my better. Go back to kissing your lord’s feet.”

“How dare you!” Mr. Malfoy snarled, beginning to pull his wand.

Surprising himself, Harry growled “Didn’t do too well the last time you tried that!”

“Mr. Malfoy you aren’t drawing your wand on a defenseless child are you?” Madam Bones asked, hers was already out. Her draw was like lightning. “A word of caution, sir, money doesn’t buy everything.”

Malfoy slapped his walking stick shut furiously and ground out “Good day, madam” before turning his back and departing.

“I am not helpless” said Harry in a disgruntled tone.

Madam Bones sighed “Believe me, Harry I know that. But, I really don’t think you need another trial for Underage Wizardry in the same day. Especially with Lucius as the accuser”

“His influence is golden, you might say” Mr. Weasley added.

Harry nodded “I think I get it” he said “Sorry about that.”

“I think we should delay the tour.” Mr. Weasley said.

Harry readily agreed “Not a problem, sir.”

“Give us a moment, Arthur” Madam Bones said “I’d like to talk with Harry in private.”

Mr. Weasley walked away to give them privacy “I’ll be waiting near the fountain” he said.

“I would imagine if there’s one subject you wouldn’t want to talk about, it would be about what happened the night Voldemort returned. Is that about right, Harry?” asked Madam Bones.

Harry looked deeply surprised “You said his name!” he observed “And you believe he’s back!”

“Yes I did” she replied “I try to set an example for everyone in my department. Arthur does try, I’ll give him that. Anyway, I wanted to speak with you about Cedric.”

Harry looked away from her and said “That’s definitely something that I don’t---“

"I'm sure it is" Madam Bones interrupted gently "And the Ministry already has a detailed account of what you told Professor Dumbledore---"

"Then how come the Daily Prophet's calling me 'emotionally unbalanced' and Dumbledore a 'crazy old coot' for believing me?" asked Harry, bitterly.

Madam Bones sighed "Unfortunately, Harry, the Prophet's printing what Cornelius and 'unnamed senior ministry officials' are telling it to. And the Minister wants to stick his head in the sand; or up his ass if you like"

"Hahaha" Harry chuckled, then he grimaced "That would be funnier if it wasn't true."

"As part of the Ministry, I can't directly say anything that disagrees with official policy. But there's no reason that you can't Harry. Cedric Diggory was a very popular student, it's been very hard for his friends. The headmaster was very forceful in instructing all the students not to push you to discuss what happened. I was hoping that now you would be able to." She said.

Harry cringed "Well, you see, that many people...I dunno"

"How about one person, then" Madam Bones offered "You know my niece fairly well."

Harry nodded "She's a nice person. She sits next to my friend Ron Weasley in Potions and with Hermione Granger in Defense Against the Dark Arts. I never talked to her much until last term though."

"Hmmm...Miss Skeeter does have a way with words" she commented.

Harry blushed at that "We didn't...I mean that's not the way it happened...err...I have a girlfriend"

"Yes, I know Harry. Susan was equally as embarrassed. How about on the Hogwarts Express, then" Madam Bones suggested.

“Sure, I guess I can” Harry said, quite unenthusiastically “But, it’s not really pleasant. Are you sure Susan want to hear it?”

Madam Bones laid a hand on his shoulder and said “Harry, have you ever felt like you wanted to know something, no matter how bad it might be. You just needed the truth.”

“Yeah” Harry snorted “I wish Dumbledore could hear that. Alright, sure, I’ll look for Susan during the trip”

“Thank you, Harry. I’ll tell Susan to keep an eye out as well. I hope you enjoy the rest of your summer”

On the Underground back to Grimmauld Place Harry asked for advice “Mr. Weasley, Madam Bones asked me to talk to Susan about what happened...that night...”

“What did you say?” he asked.

“I said I would” Harry replied “I think the way everyone’s keeping secrets is part of the problem. What I don’t know, is...well...Voldemort told Wormtail to kill the spare...meaning Cedric...I’m sure that means that if he didn’t get me then Cedric would do for the spell. But since he got me, Cedric...ahhh...just wasn’t needed.”

Mr. Weasley gasped “That’s just...well...it...its horrible. I’m sorry you heard something like that. Such a casual attitude toward murder. There’s no reason that ever needs to be repeated. In fact, we could have that memory obliterated if you want.”

“No way!” Harry said emphatically “After Lockhart there’s no way I’ll let anyone obliviate me!”

“Just a suggestion, my boy” Mr. Weasley apologized “Forget I said it. And why don’t you try to forget about Cedric for the next couple of weeks. Enjoy the rest of the summer.”

“Ok, thanks, Mr. Weasley” he said.



The party started the instant the pair opened the door. Chants of "HE GOT OFF!!" and "THREE CHEERS FOR HARRY!!" and "HOOZAAHHH!!" filled the house.

"You started without me" Harry said after he kissed Ginny.

She pulled back and asked "What do you mean?"

"Well, I got two of my three favorite tastes in one go" he said with a huge grin. He laughed at Ginny's confused look "Butterbeer is the best drink" he explained "Your Mum is the best cook and you're the best---" he broke off at the sight of ten Weasley eyes gazing at him.

Bill gestured "Yes, do go on, Harry"

"Please Harry" Ron said, cracking his knuckles

Mrs. Weasley hugged him and said "All of you sit! Harry, it was very nice of you to complement my cooking!"

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed "I'm so relieved" She looked like she desperately wanted to hug him.

There was a moment of tension that Harry broke by reaching out to her "Thanks Mione" he said

"I'm so sorry about before, Harry" she said into his shoulder "I could've at least listened to you"

"Butterbeer all around!!" Sirius called out. The music came from the Wizard Wireless. "I don't think my godson should have all the pretty girls. Miss Weasley, might I..."

Ginny took the outstretched hand and Sirius spun her around. "No rat breath? I hope" she joked.

---Hahhh--- Sirius breathed on her "I brush three times a day" he said, pretending to look offended. Ginny looked annoyed after a couple of

songs because Harry was still dancing with Hermione. “Wanna dance with your boyfriend, eh?” Sirius questioned.

“Yeah” Ginny replied.

Sirius said “Hey, Harry! For some reason my partner’d rather dance with you.”

“Think I’d like that” Harry grinned. Then mischievously added “Ron, I think Hermione still wants to dance.” He strode over to Ginny.

“Can’t figure it” Sirius muttered as he handed Ginny over “She already had the best looking guy in the place”

Harry poked him in the stomach and said “Down Padfoot” as the couple twirled off to a romantic ballad.

“Ahh...Yes...Mr. Weasley” the twins said, imitating Professor McGonagall in stereo no less “Now! Put your hand on my hip!!”

“What’s all that?” Ginny asked.

Harry giggled into her shoulder “Tell ya after this dance.”

Ron’s face looked like a stop sign by the time the twins finished with McGonagall’s failed dance class. “I wasn’t that bad” he groaned.

“Ask that poor Indian girl you took” George giggled.

This earned him a slap from his mother “Stop embarrassing your brother!” Mrs. Weasley scolded.

Harry suffered a coughing fit as he swallowed a mouthful of butterbeer instead of spraying it across the room.

The party ran almost until dawn. Everybody slept well into the next afternoon.

At dinner, Mrs. Weasley declared “That was the exception, tomorrow will be normal schedules! And you’re all going to work on the rest of the house.”

“Aww. Why can’t Kreacher do it?” Ron complained. Ron got it from two sides.

“House-elves should have the same rights as witches and wizards!” came from Hermione.

And from Mrs. Weasley came “I will not have my family become lazy!”

Harry and Ginny paired up, at least until the third day when Mrs. Weasley came across them snogging in the attic. After that incident it was strictly boys team and girls team.

“It’s all your fault, you know” said Ron, while furiously scrubbing the windows. He didn’t sound even a little bit sympathetic. Harry went back to sanding the floor.

Their Hogwarts letters arrived the next day, with book lists and grade reports. Mrs. Weasley lectured Fred and George on their results, although she did praise their Defense grades. Ron’s letter, which was heavier than everyone’s but Hermione’s revealed a Prefect badge.

“Ohhh! The shame!!” the twins groaned.

Harry and Ginny’s shoulders shook with silent laughter. Fred and George getting slapped by Mrs. Weasley just cracked them up. Ron laughed at that as well.

“And how are your grades?” Mrs. Weasley asked.

Ron read it than handed it over “Got Os in Charms and Defense. Barely passed History, though”

“Too bad they don’t give grades in mealtimes” Harry teased.

“How’d you do, smart guy?” Ron bristled.

Harry opened his and grinned "Os in Charms and Transfiguration; O+ in Defense. About the same in History"

"Well! Congratulations on making Prefect!" Mrs. Weasley said, practically strangling Ron.

Ginny looked rather upset with hers "Yeah, congrats Ron" she added.

"Something wrong, Gin?" asked Harry.

Ginny shrugged "Yeah, kinda. I failed History"

"Sure you're not the first" offered a supportive Harry "Binns IS boring"

Mrs. Weasley looked disappointed "That's not an excuse, Harry. And I expect you to do something about getting that grade up, young lady. You go straight to either Professor McGonagall or Professor Binns to work something out"

"Yes ma'am" Ginny grumbled, looking at the ground "Actually, Professor McGonagall already assigned me a tutor. It says so in the letter"

Mrs. Weasley took it, saying "Well, that's a good start"

"Hermione" guessed Ron. Harry nodded in agreement

Mrs. Weasley was scanning the letter and said "Hermione Granger---"

"Knew it!" Ron exclaimed

Mrs. Weasley read on, then stopped and backed up "Actually no" she said

I might normally recommend Hermione Granger. However, taking into consideration how close she is to your family, I feel another student would be more appropriate. Two students consistently outperform Miss Granger in History of Magic .Granted, not by much.

Harry and Ron gasped in surprise.

Miss Parkinson declined the assignment, however, Mr. Finnegan graciously volunteered to tutor you during the coming year. Mr. Finnegan received a perfect grade on the material you will be covering in class this year. It is my expectation that your grades will improve markedly.

The boys exchanged frowns.

"All out of the goodness of his heart" said Harry, very sarcastically.

Ron nodded in agreement "Yeah, a right prince of a guy"

"Is this the same Seamus Finnegan that you write about, Ronald?" asked Mrs. Weasley.

"Yeah, Mum" Ron answered. There was a hint of a growl in his voice.

Mrs. Weasley frowned at that "I thought you were friends?" she asked.

"Yeah, until he turned on Harry" Ron replied.

Mrs. Weasley's frown deepened "I seem to recall you writing a few unpleasant things about Harry at the beginning of the year Ronald" she commented.

"That's got nothing to do with it" Ron mumbled, feeling ashamed.

"Mrs. Weasley, Ron and me stopped arguing right after the first task" Harry put in "Seamus only got worse. Especially after the Yule Ball. Dean Thomas told me its because I'm dating Ginny. I really don't like the idea of him spending so much time with her."

Ginny looked irritated "I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself" she said crossly "And Seamus has always been nice to me."

"I'll bet" said Ron "You're blind, Ginny"

"Mind your own business, Ron!" she snapped

Mrs. Weasley shook her finger at her youngest son "Your sister is correct, Ronald Weasley" she said "This has nothing to do with you." Ginny grinned at the minor victory. "No smiling from you, Ginevra!" she scolded "I will be writing Professor McGonagall to ask for regular reports!"

"Yes, Mum" Ginny muttered.

Harry cringed when Mrs. Weasley looked at him "Harry, I want you to know that Mr. Weasley and I think of you as one of our own. And, kissing in the attic notwithstanding, we approve of your and Ginny's relationship. That said, Ginny's schoolwork is more important right now."

"Are you telling me to stop seeing Ginny?!" a horrified Harry asked.

"No, Harry, I'm not. But, I am telling you not to interfere with her study time" Mrs. Weasley said "You may not like this boy, but Professor McGonagall says he is the best one to help her." Mrs. Weasley subtly allowed Harry and Ginny to go together on cleaning projects for the last few days. And let them go off on their own in Diagon Alley for school supplies.

Up next: Approaching Thunder

## Approaching Thunder

Harry had come to recognize that rushing to King's Cross was a Weasley family tradition. They did slightly better this year, as the clock between Platforms Nine and Ten only read 10:53. Still, the train had started to move while the group was looking for a place to sit. Fred and George packed into a carriage with their friend Lee Jordan. "Well, let's go" said Harry.

"Err, sorry Harry. We, that is, Ron and I have to sit with the other Prefects" an uneasy Hermione said

Harry gave a distracted nod "Oh, right" he said

"Sorry about that, mate" Ron added.

Harry gave Ginny a playful look and said "No big deal. I'll find something to do" Any response from Ron was cut off by Hermione pulling him along.

"That was terrible, Harry" Ginny giggled "He won't be able to concentrate!"

Harry had a witty comeback for that, but he saw Neville struggling with his trunk. He released Ginny's hand and said "Here, let me help"

"Thanks, Harry...Hi Ginny. Everywhere's full" Neville said.

"What happened to the Patils?" Harry asked with a smirk. Remembering the Yule Ball and Neville's sudden double date.

Neville gave a nervous laugh "Err, I couldn't tell them apart" he said

"You didn't have trouble back in June" Ginny observed.

"That's just it" Neville explained "They were wearing House colors all year. We went out together early in the summer...and....er, no robes...So I ...well..."

Harry laughed, but quickly became sympathetic "Too bad, Neville, it couldn't've been pretty. Maybe they'll get over it."

"Ya think?" Neville asked, hopefully

Ginny answered "I wouldn't count on it"

"Oh" replied Neville, shoulders slumping.

"Come on, there's room here" Ginny said, pointing to a carriage "Hi, Luna. Can we join you?"

A blonde haired girl set her magazine down and gave a bright smile "Hello Ginny" she said brightly "Please, I'd like to meet new people."

"Hello" Harry said as he sat across from her. He wondered how she could read upside-down. He found it uncomfortable that she just looked at him "Err...I'm..."

"---Harry Potter" Luna finished

Ginny slid close to Harry and said "Harry's my boyfriend. This is Luna Lovegood. She's a Ravenclaw in my year."

"Who're you?" Luna asked, turning to Neville.

Neville muttered a response, so Ginny spoke up "Luna, that's Neville Longbottom. He's in Gryffindor in the same year as Harry."

"Nice to meet you Neville Longbottom" Luna said, airily "Now I have two new boyfriends"

Harry and Neville just gaped at the upside down Quibbler that Luna put back in place. Ginny's response was laughter "Honestly...boys" she complained "Look, you're both boys...yes?" She waited until they nodded, and then "Fine...a boy who's a friend...get it?"

"I guess" was Harry's answer. Neville just nodded. Ginny moaned.

Ron and Hermione arrived "Something wrong, Ginny?" she asked.



“Boys are clueless” Ginny said “So how was the Prefect meeting?”

“Abysmal” Hermione groaned “You know there’s two for each House, right? A boy and a girl”

“Bet’cha Draco’s dear old Dad made sure he got the job” Harry said.

Ron gave a disgruntled nod “Got it in one”

“And that cow Pansy Parkinson...” Hermione added.

“Hufflepuff?” Harry asked.

Mouth full of food, Ron answered “Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbott”

“Hannah’s OK, don’t know Macmillan” said Harry

“Chew your food, Ronald” Hermione said “Anthony Goldstein and Padma Patil for Ravenclaw”

Neville groaned “Merlin help me, I’ll never get out of detention”

“I wouldn’t worry too much, mate” Harry said while patting his shoulder “She might be gunning for Ron just as much”

Not understanding, Ron asked “Wha’did I do?”

“Took her to the Yule Ball” answered Luna from behind her upside down Quibbler.

Ron gave the paper a dirty look, but didn’t reply.

Almost simultaneously, two girls came up to the carriage and said “Hi, Harry” They nudged each other in an effort to get in. One, rather tall, with long dark hair that used to give Harry goosebumps. The other, shorter and with a brighter-than-Weasley shade of red hair. Neither of them made it though the door.

“Err...hi Cho, hi Susan” said Harry.

Cho Chang, the Ravenclaw seeker, took one look at Harry and Ginny’s interlaced fingers and said “Well, just thought I’d say hi...see you around, Harry” her face twisted into a look like she’d eaten a really nasty Bertie Bott’s Bean.

“Weird girl” Ron commented, as Cho vanished into the corridor. He smiled at the Hufflepuff girl.

Hermione scowled, first at Ron, then at Susan “Something we can do for you?” she asked in a less than friendly tone.

“My auntie said that Harry would be able to talk to me about what happened...that night” Susan answered.

Ron looked like he was putting something together, then his eyes went between Harry and Susan “Merlin’s beard, Harry!” he exclaimed “Do you know everyone!?”

“What’d I do now?” asked Harry in a confused tone.

Susan gave an embarrassed giggle and said “I think I know why Aunt Amelia liked you, Harry. You didn’t make a big deal over who she is”

“Been sitting next to you for four years...Never knew” Ron grumbled, with his head in his hands.

A confused Harry said “I just thought she was one of the people questioning me”

“Well, lets not tell her that” Susan suggested, patting his shoulder.

Harry felt a tightening of Ginny’s grip on his hand “So who is she?” he asked

“Only the most powerful witch in Britain” Ron explained “Harry, she’s in charge of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and the Speaker of the Wizengamot.”

Susan looked down, shyly and said "Well...yeah...that's about right. You didn't forget, did you, Harry?"

"It's not that I forgot, Susan." Harry replied "We were celebrating the how the trial came out. I just didn't mention afterward. And if you really want to hear about it...then, I guess..."

"It's not that I want to, believe me." Susan interrupted "It's that I have to. The Diggorys live in the same village as my family. He was like a big brother to me."

Harry's shoulders slumped "I guess it was a bit selfish of me" he said.

"All the carriages are full, but we can go stand between the cars" Susan suggested.

The Hogwarts Express, like most magical things, had capabilities far greater than a Muggle item just like it. For one, it could go twice the speed of the most modern Muggle trains. Another Magical feature was the shield that went up between the cars, so that students could pass safely between them, the entire length of the train. It wasn't even windy in those spaces.

"OK" Harry agreed "I won't be too long. See ya in a bit" Harry leaned over to kiss Ginny, expecting lips, he was a little surprised when he ended up kissing her cheek instead.

As Harry closed the door behind him, Ginny said "No problem, Harry--"

Ron, Hermione, Luna and Neville heard the rest of Ginny's comment "---Sure, go off with another girl without so much as a by-your-leave."

"That's not right, Ginny" Neville said "Harry cares about you. He's just keeping his promise to Madam Bones."

"Stay out of this, Neville!" Ginny growled "Hermione, let's go find out what they're talking about."

Hermione shook her head “No way.” She said “Maybe, Susan can't be trusted. I don't think she's gone out with anyone since Justin. But, I've known Harry too long. Besides, he hardly talked to her before last year.”

“How about you, Ron?” she asked.

“After what happened this summer, we're lucky he's talking to us at all” Ron replied, coldly “If you go spying on him I'll let him know and don't go involving Fred and George either.”

“Is it all right with you if I take a walk?” Ginny asked resentfully, as she opened the carriage door.

Ron shrugged “Fine by me, but as soon as you leave, me and Hermione are going on patrol. Prefect duties and all”

“Uhh, Luna, would you care to take a walk?” Neville asked.

Luna put the Quibbler down and said “That might be nice. We should leave the Danish Doxies behind.”

This left Neville wondering whether he was out of the frying pan and into the fire.

As they departed, they ran into Seamus “How was the summer, Neville?” he asked.

“Coulda been better” Neville replied “Yours?”

Seamus shrugged “No big deal. But the last week was pretty good.” He said “Hey, did you happen to see Ginny Weasley around? I'm supposed to be---”

“I'm here, Seamus. Hold on” Ginny replied, glaring at Ron and Hermione “I could use a friendly face about now.” She pulled out her History of Magic book and some parchment and left.

Meanwhile, Susan was leaning against car #4 and Harry was leaning against car #5. Neither knowing quite where to start. Finally, Susan was the first to speak "So, how was your summer?" she asked

"Started out pretty lousy with my Muggle relatives" Harry replied "But, it was ok after the hearing. I spent the rest of the summer at...err...that is with the Weasleys."

---Right, Harry's relatives...bad subject--- Susan made a mental note. "Must be fun being able to spend so much time with your girlfriend" she commented

"Actually, I've spent as much time as possible with the Weasleys as I could every summer" Harry replied. "It's only this year me and Ginny were together."

"Awfully convenient for snogging though" Susan teased.

Harry blushed and grumbled "Yeah, until you're caught by Mrs. Weasley. Anyway, how was your summer?"

"Carefree and boy-free" Susan sighed "Got way ahead in homework. Might be able to take OWLs already. So, now I can have some fun. Maybe this year I'll find Mr. Bones"

Harry laughed "I thought the girl took the boy's name" he said.

"We'll see about that" Susan shot back playfully "The only thing about this summer I regret is I didn't get to ram Rita Skeeter's wand up her ass."

Harry practically howled with laughter "Well, I'll let you in on a secret. It'll be a while before Miss Skeeter will cause trouble around Hogwarts. Hermione found out she's an Animagus, a beetle...ugly little thing, too. She kept her trapped in a jar for a couple of weeks.

"That's illegal, Harry" Susan commented.

Harry shrugged "So is being an Animagus and not registering with the Ministry. Besides, we gave her a nice blade of grass to chew on.

Anyway, Hermione made her promise not to write stories about anyone at Hogwarts for a year.”

“That’s ruddy brilliant!” Susan exclaimed, dissolving in a fit of giggles “Fifty...points....to Gryffindor!”

Harry joined in her merriment and said “Why, thank you Professor Bones!”

“About Cedric?” she asked once the laughter faded.

Harry sighed. He’d been enjoying the conversation as it was. He said “I can’t tell you exactly what he did in the maze, because all of us had different kinds of tests. Fleur, Viktor and I compared stories. Fleur got grabbed and sucked in by those hedges. That’s why she came out first and her cloak was all torn up.”

“I remember” said Susan “She was bleeding from her face and arm, too.”

“I didn’t see that” Harry continued “Our fake Professor Moody put the Imperious Spell on Viktor and made him attack me just as I saw the Goblet. Then, Cedric came around the corner and knocked him out. Vines shot out from the maze and tangled him up. I cut the vines and freed him. I told him he should have the cup. He said I should. We settled on taking it together.”

“A nice bit of fair play” she commented

“Yeah, great” Harry snorted irritably “If I’d taken it myself Cedric would still be here. The cup was a portkey. It took us to this cemetery. A Death Eater named...by the way....did you know it wasn’t Sirius Black that killed all those Muggles right after my parents were murdered?”

Susan shook her head “Uh-uh, but what does that have to do with this?”

“It was Peter Pettigrew who killed all those Muggles that time. He did it to avoid Azkaban and frame Sirius at the same time. He was there

holding this ugly grey thing about the size of a baby” Harry recalled “Cedric and I had our wands out. But it was such a surprise. Before we knew it, Pettigrew hit Cedric with the Avada Kedarva curse...I don’t know if this helps, but it happened so fast----”

Susan sniffled and rubbed at her nose “---It didn’t hurt much” she finished bitterly “No, that’s not really comforting”

“Sorry” mumbled Harry, he scratched his head.

“Oh, its not your fault, Harry” she said “I’m not mad at you. Its just...it seems like he died for nothing. Like he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Like the way Uncle Ed died the first time You Know Who tried to take over.”

Here was someone else that lost a loved one “I’m sorry Susan” he said “Did Voldemort kill him?”

“NO!” she squeaked. A look of terror flashed across her face. “No.” she repeated in a normal tone “Uncle Ed was an Obliviator. There had been a fight between Aurors and Death Eaters right near Buckingham Palace in the middle of the day. A Death Eater named Dolohov grabbed him as a hostage and disappeared. It was almost a month before his body was found. They didn’t have to kill him.” She looked at Harry with tears running down her cheeks.

Instinctively, Harry wiped her tears “I never knew about that” he admitted “Actually, no one tells me anything about what happened then”

“I could tell you what I know” Susan offered “Err...If you wanted”

Harry grinned “That’d be nice. I’m sure you’d give more interesting lessons than Binns”

“Thanks...I think” Susan said sourly “Well at least I’m prettier than a ghost”

Harry coughed nervously and said “I didn’t ...err...mean it like that...You’re very pretty.”

“Why thanks, Harry.” Susan said blushing softly “Didn’t know you noticed me.”

Harry started to sweat “Ahh...that is...umm I didn’t really notice girls...err...til last year.”

“Yeah, ever get that pumpkin juice stain out?” she asked, giggling.

Harry looked confused, then indignant “HEY!” he exclaimed. Then he laughed, too and slapped her shoulder lightly.

“Watch it, Potter” she said, punching him back.

Harry fake rubbed his arm “Ok, ok, you win” he said “We should head back”

“I wii—iiin, I wii---iiin” she sang as she went in. Harry laughed and chased her.

They were engaged in a slap fight when an indignant voice yelled “You two! Break that up or I’ll assign lines!”

“Err...sorry” Harry giggled “Oh! Hey, ‘Mione”

Hermione huffed angrily “Harry! Susan? Sheesh! You’re Fifth Years!” she lectured “Set an example to the younger years. Please!”

“Bye, Harry!” Susan yelled as she took off.

Harry yelled after her “Sure! Great! Leave me to face the evil Prefect!”

“Well, I guess it went ok?” a bemused Hermione commented.

Harry nodded and said “Yeah. Its good. She just wanted the truth.” He stepped past Hermione and looked into the carriage “Hey, where’s Ginny?” he asked.

“After you left, Seamus stopped by” Hermione answered “I assume they’re talking about the tutoring he’ll be doing”



“Oh” Harry replied grumpily “I still think you’d be a better choice”

Hermione gave him a pained look and said “Look, Harry, this year we have OWLs. I’m a Prefect. Plus I already tutor four other students. I’d probably have said no, besides, Seamus got perfect grades from the first test to the final exam.”

“I don’t trust him” Harry growled sullenly as he slumped into the carriage. Hermione refrained from commenting.

Ron, coming from the bathroom, sat down across from Harry “Hey mate. Wanna play some Snap?” he offered cheerily.

“Sure, why not” Harry replied.

The whole carriage got into the game and it wasn’t until the train’s whistle blew that anyone thought about the time. Luna and Hermione stepped out so the boys could change into their robes. Then Harry, Neville and Ron stepped out for the girls. While the boys were standing in the corridor, Ginny ran up. “Well, done with Bubbles Bones?” she snapped at Harry. Harry just blinked at her. “Move, Ron!” she snapped at her brother. And finally, “Luna, Hermione! Let me in!” The door slammed shut behind her.

“What the bloody hell’s the matter with you?” Harry demanded as soon as the door opened.

Ginny glared at him and shot back “None of your business! Have fun with Bones?”

“THAT was my next question!” he countered “What’s wrong with Susan all of a sudden?”

Ginny crossed her arms over her chest and said “When you figure that out, you let me know”

In response, Harry opened his trunk, grabbed a random book, put it in front of his face and started reading. He groaned silently, it was his Fifth Year book for History of Magic. He didn’t see it, but Ginny’s face

turned bright red. And it wasn't the blush of shyness or embarrassment. It was the red of raw fury. To her, he was purposely mocking her. The final ten minutes of the train ride were just plain uncomfortable.

When the train arrived at the station, it immediately started to empty. Harry and Ginny, sitting at the window, were left alone in the carriage. "Need a hand with your trunk, Gin?" Harry offered in an apologetic tone

"I am perfectly capable of doing it myself" she said, coldly "Sod off!"

Harry angrily yanked his trunk from the overhead rack "Fine!" he snapped as he stormed out.

"Harry, where's Ginny?" asked Hermione as he finished stacking his trunks and Hedwig's cage.

Harry shrugged "I offered to help her, but she told me to sod off. So, I sodded off. I'm getting real sick of people going off at me for no reason"

"Well, Well, Well if it ain't Bad Luck Potter and his cronies" Draco Malfoy drawled.

Harry groaned "Can't you, just once, say nothing Malfoy"

"Mind your manners, Potter" the blond haired boy threatened "You don't want a detention or two, now do you? Or maybe a hundred lines of 'I wish I wasn't a scarhead' Crabbe and Goyle dutifully chuckled at the idea.

Ron got toe to toe with Malfoy, emphasizing a slight, but definite height difference. Ron sneered down "You do that and I'll have your pets doing three hundred lines of 'I wish my lips weren't stuck to Draco's ass'

"And I'll report both of you for abusing your authority" Hermione declared "Now back off, Ronald"

Ron backed away from Draco "But, 'Mione" he half whined

"Hahahaha!" Draco laughed "Mudblood's got you whipped, Weasley!"

Harry grabbed handfuls of Draco's robes and lifted him off the ground. His voice almost animal-like he said "If you ever use that word again, I'll show you what some of Voldemort's spells feel like!"

"Harry let him go!" Hermione whispered urgently "Please!"

Harry dropped him. Draco and his cronies took off. Ron laughed at the running boys. Harry heard Ginny's voice and his expression softened instantly. He looked for her. But, she gave him a frown and got in a coach with Fred, George and Lee Jordan. Harry just sighed, this year was starting out badly. The train ride was a disaster. Except, he realized, for his conversation with Susan. A genuine smile appeared on his face.

"What's got you grinning?" asked Ron.

Harry shrugged nonchalantly "Heh, rather enjoyed the look on Malfoy's face!"

Ron laughed back. "You and Ginny'll be fine, won't you Harry?" he asked seriously.

"Sure, but I still don't even know what she's mad about" Harry replied.

A nervous Hermione answered "Ahh...Harry what was the last thing you heard Ginny say before you left the carriage with Susan Bones?"

"What does she have to do with this?" asked Harry, suddenly glad of his little white lie

Hermione sighed, not really wanting to answer that question. She hoped Harry would understand that she just wanted to help "I'm sorry Harry" she began "What she said was "No problem, Harry---"

"I heard that" Harry interrupted

"You need to hear the rest" she replied "The rest of it, which I guess you didn't hear was "---Sure, go off with another girl without so much as a by-your-leave."

Harry grunted angrily "But she decided she could go off with Finnegan and not even tell me...let alone ask MY permission."

"Waitamminute, Harry" said Hermione "Look, I don't wanna be in the middle of this. You're both very important to me."

Harry nodded and said "Sure, sorry. It's between me and her. Ron, you OK with that?"

"To tell you the truth, Harry, I'm more on your side in this anyway." Ron admitted "I don't get why Ginny's acting like this anymore than you do. But, she's still my sister."

After an uneventful coach ride the trio entered the Great Hall. Harry immediately sought Ginny. She was sitting among mostly Fourth Years. Harry went from confusion to annoyance when he noted the lack of space for him to sit. The twins and Lee were part of the group, he saw. What made him grab a fistful of hair, though, was that Seamus was across and two seats from Ginny. He walked up and tapped her on the shoulder "Can I talk to you, Gin?" he asked.

"Excuse me, you're interrupting a private conversation" one of her roommates said coldly.

Harry glared at the girl "Mind your own business, Marion. Besides, I wasn't talking to you" he snarled. He enjoyed watching her flinch.

"Go bother someone else, Potter!" Seamus exclaimed.

"Fuck off, Finnegan!" Harry fired back.

Ginny stood up angrily and growled "Harry, you're just being plain rude! I think you should apologize!"

"Pfft!" he scoffed "You said the same thing to me earlier. As for apologizing to that twit, you can forget it!" he gestured at Seamus.

Ginny crossed her arms over her chest and said "I think you should leave, Harry. I'll talk to you later."

"Eh...Maybe I'll be interested, then" said Harry in a flat tone. Then he walked off. He slumped down next to Hermione in the spot she held for him.

She patted his shoulder and asked "It didn't go well, did it?"

"Got that right" replied Harry "Her buddies, including Finnegan ganged up on me. And about all Ginny had to say was I owed them an apology. Well she can forget it! Especially Finnegan!"

A nervous Ron asked "So ...ahhh... what're you going to do ...err...next?"

"Right now, nothing, Ron" Harry replied, feeling very tired "If she wants to talk to me, she can find me. I'm about done trying." He basically ignored Dumbledore's announcements, nor did he pay attention to the new professor's speech. He clapped mechanically whenever he heard Gryffindor during Sorting time and hardly tasted his food.

Ron nudged him and said "C'mon, mate, a game of chess'll do ya good"

"You mean it'll do your ego good" Harry snorted in amusement

Ron nodded amiably and admitted "Well, that too."

"We can't Ronald" Hermione hissed "We have to lead the First Years to the dorms---sorry Harry"

Harry shrugged "S'alright. I'll catch you up later"

"Let's go, Midgets!" bellowed Ron, waving his arm.

Hermione slapped his arm and said "They ARE NOT MIDGETS Ronald...Gryffindor First Years, please follow us! Thank you!"

"You tell'em 'Mione" Harry giggled to himself. He spent a few minutes trying to get Ginny's attention at the other end of the table. They locked eyes once, but she turned away. "I give up" he muttered and headed out. Not paying attention, he crashed into someone. Annoyed, he started "Watch where you're---"

The other person laughed "Haven't we been here before"

"You two must stop meeting like this" a second person laugh "People will start talking"

Harry, holding his eye, looked up and joined the laughter "Quite the helpful prefect, ain't ya, Abbott?" he asked sourly.

"Oh, please, that won't even bruise" scoffed Hannah "Madam Pomfrey would throw you out if you went to the hospital wing for it"

Susan had a silly grin "Haven't we been here before?" she asked again.

"Not sure" Harry quipped "What's your name?"

Both girls laughed. "Maybe this time we should get out of our robes before trying to untangle them" Susan suggested.

Having worked himself out of his robe, Harry turned around. He swallowed hard upon seeing Susan in a white t-shirt. She had an incredible figure! Harry bit his tongue. Her shorts left little to the imagination. They hugged her legs and only got half way to her knees "Bloody hell" he groaned softly.

"What was that, Harry?" she asked.

Harry stammered "A-a-a-a th-th-is is a-a-a worse mess than last t-t-time" he fought hard to keep his eyes locked on her face.

"Let's leave it for the House Elves, then" Hannah suggested "We just toss both robes in the laundry"

Harry was more easily able to look at Hannah, who was still fully robed "Sounds like a plan" he said. Leaving his tangled with Susan's. "Well see you later, Hannah. You too, Susan"

"We're heading for our Common Room, too. Can we join you?" suggested Hannah.

Harry, who wanted nothing more than to get away, could only smile and say "Sure." He asked about Hannah's summer. And listened with half an ear. He tried to keep focused on her, but twice, his eyes locked with Susan's. He also couldn't help it when they strayed down to her t-shirt. Susan brought him back to reality.

"Listen, Harry" Susan said as they got to Gryffindor Tower "I think about everyone heard what...err...happened before the feast."

Harry didn't feel at all comfortable with that topic "Yeah...ahhh...well" he said.

"Its alright if you don't wanna talk about it" Susan sympathized "I just thought it was probably hard...y'know ...talking to Ron or Hermione...considering...If you ever want someone a little less involved Well, see ya round" she patted his chest as she departed with Hannah.

"Night" said Hannah, quite simply.

Harry stared after the Hufflepuffs until they were out of sight. Left alone with his own thoughts, Harry wondered how someone he'd only actually started talking to last year could seem to understand him so well. --And she bounces really nice---came from deeper in Harry's brain. Pushing that thought aside, at the moment, the only other girl he really felt comfortable with was Hermione.

Maybe he should ask Susan to help him figure out Ginny. But that idea made him feel strange, too. "Why are girls so frustrating?" he growled under his breath. "Mimulus Mibletonia"

Ron spotted Harry and said "Help!" He was surrounded by the group of First Year boys.

“Sorry Ron, you’re the Prefect” he chuckled and bounded up the stairs taking them three at a time. He started unpacking his trunk.

Hannah and Susan reached the Sixth Year Girls dorm in Hufflepuff Tower before they started talking again.

“I think this thing between Harry and Ginny is even worse than it looks” said Susan.

Hannah gave her a quizzical look “How do you mean, Sue?” she asked.

“Well, I noticed how he mostly looked at you the whole time” Susan commented “You still seeing that Muggle boy, whats-his-name?”

Hannah groaned, her best friend hadn’t hit it off with her boyfriend “Give Brian a break, can’t ya, Sue? It’s not his fault his cousin was a complete jerk. And yes, I’m still going home every couple of weeks during school!”

“I’m sorry, honest Hannah” Susan replied “I’m trying, really...honest”

Hannah sighed “Yeah...I know” she fell silent in thought then continued “You know, Sue, I think you might be right about Harry and Ginny, but I think you’re the one that caught his interest, not me.”

“No way!” Susan exclaimed “Every time I looked at him, his eyes were pinned like glue to you!”

“Oh, Merlin! You’re clueless!” Hannah retorted “I wasn’t the one advertising!”

“What are you talking about?” asked Susan in a confused tone.

In response, Hannah grabbed her shoulders, turned her sideways and said “NOW! Look in the mirror and do it as if you were an average teenage boy



“Not bad, not bad at all” Susan said. She was quite proud of her body. She bounced on her toes causing her breasts to bounce around. “HEY!”

Hannah flicked the side of her friend’s head “Right, now,” she lectured “The only time he really looked at me was when I was talking. And if he looked at you, the only place he looked was straight at your face. You’ve been wearing that shirt for two years! The only reason for any teenage boy not to look at them (She poked one of Susan’s breasts) is that he’s purposely NOT looking”

“Or he’s gay!” Susan giggled

Hannah gave a disgusted look “Harmph!” she said “And besides, I think Weasley has already answered that one. Now, the question is; Do you like Harry Potter?”

“Well, I think every witch had a little girl crush on the Boy-Who-Lived” Susan hedged.

Hannah rolled her eyes and exclaimed “SUSAN AMEILA BONES!!”

“HANNAH VICTORIA ABBOTT!!” the redhead retorted.

With a sly look Hannah asked “How’d his chest feel?”

“Huh?” Susan’s eyes went wide, she blabbered “I was just saying...that is...it was just...I was being friendly”

“Hmmm?” was Hannah’s only response.

Susan sighed wistfully “Alright, lets just say Quidditch does a body good. But, I’m not gonna try to break them up. I’m not like that. And, if he wants my help, I’ll give him my honest answers.”

“Being a Hufflepuff is a heavy burden” Hannah commented sagely “But, if they do. I’d suggest you go for it. You do seem to have an inside track ... y’know Hannah Potter doesn’t have a bad ring to it...Same initials and all”

Susan shook her and said "Not happening, Abbott. Blonds and Potters don't mix. Ever see a picture of Harry's Mum? Grandmum? Great-Grandmum? Great- Great-Grandmum? Great- Great- Great-Grandmum?"

"Alright Bones!" Hannah scolded "Lines for you!!"

Susan's jaw dropped "You can't do that! You're my best friend!" she gasped

"I'm a Prefect" the blond girl fired back "Twenty lines of 'I WILL be more than a friend to Harry Potter' Capitalize will and press down hard on more than." She turned to leave, but Susan hit her with a pillow. Hannah turned and with a smirk added "Attacking a Prefect, Bones? Another ten lines and straight to bed when you're done!"

Before Hannah just the door, Susan grumbled "Prefects are power hungry and plain evil"

"Ain't that what you told me Harry said about Hermione?" Hannah giggled "Night Sue"

Susan silently cursed her friend and good-naturedly began writing.

## Meltdown

"Up and at'em Ron!" Harry yelled. "Move it Weasley! We don't wanna be late for the first day of class!"

Ron turned onto his belly and slammed a pillow over his head "Who the bloody hell let Hermione in?" came his muffled question.

Some minutes later "Its about time!" their bushy haired friend said as they hit the common room "Do you honestly want to be late the first day of class"

Ron gave Harry a dirty look "Just what I need" he mumbled "two Hermiones. Do me a favor, mate. Move into the girls' dorm."

"Good morning, Hermione" said Harry, fairly cheerily

She blinked in surprise "You're in a good mood...considering" she observed.

"Hey, Dean" said Harry.

Dean gave a friendly nod and eyed Ron "Well, look what finally woke up" he observed "Can't wait to see how you do once the prefect patrols start. Anyway, good holiday Harry?"

"Had better" Harry grumbled "Yours?"

Dean grinned widely and said "Renewed an old acquaintance you might say. Better'n Seamus, he was telling me his dragged til just about the end"

"Yeah, just about the time his letter arrived!" Harry said loudly enough to make sure Seamus, across the Common Room, heard it.

Seamus gave him a nasty look and, as if he'd already been talking, said "So anyway, like I was saying, me Mum almost kept me home this year. Between Dumbledore and Potter ---"

“So, she thinks I’m a liar and Dumbledore’s an old fool?” Harry asked angrily as he walked over to Seamus. He stopped right on top of him

Seamus was forced to look up as Harry was several inches taller “Yeah, something like that, mate” he sneered.

“Well that answers that” Harry shot back.

“What’s that supposed to mean, scarhead?” asked Seamus

“Got all your stupidity from your mother” replied Harry.

Seamus’ face twisted in fury and he clenched his fists. But Hermione jumped in, pushing them apart “Go to breakfast Seamus!” she ordered. Looking at all the shocked faces, which consisted mostly of First Years Hermione, very irritably said “The rest of you, too! Move it!” The common room emptied as fast as people could get through the hole.

“I believe you Harry” said Neville, giving him a pat on the back.

Ron said “Yeah Harry, let go, I’m starved”

“What else is new Ron?” replied Harry with a weak laugh.

At breakfast, whispers flew up and down the Gryffindor table. Magically, they seemed to skip the area that Ron Hermione and Harry were sitting in.

After the plates were cleared, Professor Dumbledore, announced “And here are your schedules for the year. Class will begin promptly in one half hour.” He tapped his wand on the tall stack of cards and they flew off. Each landing in front of the correct student.

“Well, we’re all together again.” Ron noted happily

Hermione scanned the cards and noted, with displeasure “Except where I have Ancient Runes, you both have nothing. Honestly!”

“Good Morning, Harry” the quite pleasant voice of Susan Bones said as he was trying to pull his schedule away from Hermione.

Harry turned, smiling “Hi yourself, Sue” he said.

“Wanted to see if we got the same classes again” she said.

Harry tugged on his schedule again, still unable to free it from Hermione’s grasp “Wouldn’t know” he gritted out “Haven’t been able to see it yet”

“Sorry” Hermione said, sheepishly as she released it.

Harry still didn’t get to see it as Susan immediately had it “Gee, don’t suppose I need to know my classes”

“Defense...Potions...Herbology” Susan noted “Maybe we could switch around a bit. All these years I never sat next to Harry” She leaned over Harry, with both schedules and pointed out “And, look, Astronomy too. That’s four classes together. Wicked!”

Harry was a little annoyed “Great.” He said flatly “I still haven’t seen it yet”

“Sorry” said Susan, blushing slightly “But I noticed an empty spot. How come?”

Hermione grinned widely “See, Harry, I’m not the only one!” she said triumphantly. “I’m taking Ancient Runes. How about you?”

“This is all your fault Harry” said Ron, frowning.

Susan ignored Ron, and replying to Hermione, said “Magical Law and Government. The Bones have been in politics for almost half a millennium. We’ve had three Ministers of Magic and my Aunt Amelia is the second Wizengamot Speaker from my family.”

“Bet ya did good in History” Harry grumbled softly.

“Well” she said, modestly “Not top five, but good enough. Why?”

"Mr. Number One down there gets to spend time with my girlfriend" said Harry resentfully.

Susan gave a confused look, to which Hermione explained "Ginny didn't do well in History of Magic last year. So Professor McGonagall asked Seamus Finnegan to help"

"What're you doing over here, Bones?" an angry Ginny demanded.

Susan looked down at Ginny, "I'm not answerable to you, Weasley" she shot back "You're no prefect"

"Well, that's easy enough. Ron, don't you think Hufflepuffs should be at their table?" she asked, glaring at Susan.

Hermione shook her head and said "There's no such rule, Ginny and you know it. You've eaten with Luna Lovegood at her table before. And she's eaten with you here---"

"You're being rude and I think you should apologize" said Harry, throwing Ginny's words back at her.

Ginny dismissed it with a wave and said "We have other things to talk about, Harry"

"After you apologize to my friend" Harry said, stubbornly. He glared at Ginny.

Ginny glared right back and countered "You mean like the way you've apologized to Seamus?"

"I think I'll just go" said an uncomfortable Susan.

Before she could, Harry grabbed part of her robe and said "I'm sorry, Sue"

"Don't worry about it Harry" she said. "I'll see ya in class"

Harry watched her leave. For a moment the robes weren't there in his mind, but she sat next to Hannah. "Sue's never done anything to you, Ginny" he snapped at his girlfriend "She's nothing like Seamus either. He was nasty to me all last year and I'm getting sick of you defending him all the time!"

Ginny got red in the face "Don't you holler at me, Harry Potter!"

"Stop it, Gin!" Hermione hissed "We'll get in trouble!"

While Harry, Ron and Hermione headed for History of Magic, Ginny headed for Potions.

Susan and Hannah went for the Law class. In there, Blaise Zabini was the bane of Hannah's existence. In larger classes, she could ignore him, not so in a class of ten.

"Why is an attractive pure-blood witch wasting herself on a Muggle?" the Slytherin boy asked. Blaise was good looking and knew it.

Susan spoke before Hannah did "Ever read the Section Nine laws, Zabini?" she asked

"About relations between wizards and witches" he replied "So?"

Hannah smirked at her friend and replied "Maybe you need to read them again"

"Well, off to Potions" Susan said, a little glumly "Pray I keep it under twenty points"

Hannah winked at her and suggested "Keep your robe open and say hi to Harry for me" With that, she took off in the opposite direction.

"Ten points, Bones" Professor Snape said as she entered the dungeon "Have you forgotten my expectation of timeliness"

Susan shook her head "No Professor, sorry sir. Its just my Government class is farther from here---"

"Then I suggest you move faster next time" he said coldly "Take a seat"

The only empty seat was beside Harry "Hey" he whispered by way of greeting "Off to a great start, huh?"

"Stuff it" she whispered, but added a wink.

Harry botched his Draught of Peace potion and earned a zero for the day. Of course Professor Snape had to announce it to the class. There was, however, nothing for Harry to call him on and take before Professor McGonagall or Professor Dumbledore. While everyone else was turning in their potions, Harry packed up and left.

When Hermione and Ron joined him for lunch she was quite sympathetic "I really thought with him in the Order, Professor Snape would've changed"

"Yeah, well, that's good old Snivellus for ya" Harry replied.

Ron laughed at that "Merlin I wish I could've used that one!"

"Well don't, Ronald! Harry was just plain lucky" Hermione scolded.

Ron gave her a nasty look and said "I know that Hermione! I'm not stupid! I'll never trust him. How do we know he's still not working for You-Know-Who?"

"Professor Dumbledore says so" Hermione replied, satisfied with that.

Ron crossed his arms "Well, I think he should prove it to the rest of us" he said grumpily.

Highly irritated, Hermione replied "Its not your place---"

"Shut up! Both of you!" Harry cut in "You're giving me a bloody headache!" In this case, he happened to agree completely with Ron, but he was just sick of the arguing. Harry stood up, fully prepared to storm out of the Hall. But he spotted first Hannah Abbott, then Susan.



Hannah was the first to speak when Harry came over “Well, well and how is our favorite Gryffindor?” she said lightly.

“I’ve got a bit of a thumping headache.” Harry complained “Would you mind if I joined you guys?”

“Couldn’t Hermione help cure that?” Susan asked.

Harry frowned at her slightly “Not when she’s part of the cause.”

“C’mon Sue, budge over” Hannah ordered. She slapped the space now between them and said “Take a load off. Professor Snape had my class do Pep-Up Potion...down the hatch.”

Harry laughed and said “Yes, Madam Pomfrey” He downed it in one swallow. The pain faded quickly “Sweet!” he exclaimed “Tastes better than most of her potions”

“Ahh...that’s my secret ingredient” said Hannah with an air of mystery. “And now that your head is clear, I think we should remind you that we are not guys. I personally thought you knew that after seeing Sue without her robe.”

“Hannah!!” Susan squealed. She would’ve smacked her friend, but Harry was between them. Harry turned toward Susan, blushing, but before he could say anything the conversation was interrupted.

“You don’t belong here, four-eyes!” another of Harry’s problems growled.

Harry snarled at him and said “Shut up...Filch!”

Susan giggled.

“That’s Finch-Fletchley” Justin fired back.

Harry scoffed “Why can’t you pick one?”

“Five points to Gryffindor” Susan outright laughed.

Justin's temper flared. He slapped his hand on the table and said "I wasn't talking to you, slag!"

"Apologize at once!" Hannah said harshly. Justin hissed at her. "Fine!" Hannah continued "Two hundred lines of 'Anyone is welcome at the Hufflepuff table' and Five hundred lines of 'I Justin Finch-Fletchley apologize to fellow Hufflepuff Susan Bones for using a bad word in reference to her!'"

"Forget it Abbott! You're just doing that because the slag's your buddy!" Justin accused.

Susan, who had just paled the first time, slapped him. One of her nails drew a line of blood across his jaw.

"Miss Bones! Explain yourself!" Professor Sprout demanded. Hannah, as a Prefect, reported the incident "Is that correct?" the Head of Hufflepuff asked of everyone around

Students nodded. Harry offered "Yes ma'am, every detail"

"Very well. First, Harry, I apologize to you on behalf of my House. Guests are always welcome here. Miss Bones, striking a fellow student is improper behavior. One point from Hufflepuff. And Mr. Finch-Fletchley I expect you to do double Miss Abbott's assignment."

Hannah and Susan high-fived right across Harry's face.

"I hate all of you" a furious Justin said.

"And maybe next time, I won't call off a snake" threatened Harry.

Justin swallowed hard and left as quickly as he could without running.

"My hero!" Susan joked, as she kissed Harry's cheek.

Harry blushed vividly, not so much from the kiss, but from his arm getting trapped by Susan's breasts as she leaned in "I ...err... gotta go. See ya, Hannah, Susan."

“How’d I end up Susan again?” the redhead asked

Hannah giggled at the question “You just keep doing what you’re doing.”

“But, I didn’t...I mean” Susan said “That wasn’t intentional!”

Harry caught up with Ron on the way to Divination “We’re gonna try and stop fighting” said Ron “But, Hermione thinks you should try not losing your temper and start talking about your problems”

“That’s a little hard, Ron” Harry grumbled “My biggest problem, right now, is Ginny. And we all agreed not to talk about it because...well, you know. And you saw what happened the last time.”

Ron nodded and said “Look, Harry, I know I said I didn’t want to be involved. But both of us have tried to talk to Ginny. She just tells us it’s none of our business.”

“Well, I agree with her there” Harry replied irritably.

Ron’s temper flared, but he pushed it back and said “Nononono that’s not what I mean. I’m still not taking sides. All I tried to do was get her to talk it out with you. But she accused me of taking your side.”

“And Hermione?” asked Harry.

Ron shrugged “Ginny ignores her completely.” Then, anxiously, he asked “What’s going on with you and Susan Bones?”

“Nothing you haven’t seen, Ron” he replied “And I don’t much like what you’re asking.”

“Sorry, mate” he apologized “Its just that I saw her kiss you. And ...umm...so did Ginny”

Harry actually saw Ron’s point there. The truth was he liked that moment more than he probably should have, but he wasn’t about to admit it “Susan’s a nice person, and a friend Ron” he said “Justin’s

still holding a grudge from last year. She just thanked me for backing her up”

“Do you think you should tell Ginny that?” asked Ron in a slightly pleading tone.

“I will...if she asks about it” Harry answered. They went in to DADA.

It was the virtually unanimous opinion of the OWL level students that Defense Against the Dark Arts was a complete disaster. Hermione summed it up in one sentence “Return to Basic Principals --- not actually practice spells --- POPPYCOCK!”

“Plus that bloody liar gave me a week of detention for telling the truth!!” Harry growled, having just come from their Head's office.

“What happened when you saw McGonagall?” asked Ron.

Harry snorted in disgust “She told me I had to go” he said “Oh! And she complemented Hermione. I told her that Umbridge’s speech meant the Ministry is trying to interfere in Hogwarts. She was glad I’m listening to you.”

“Well, it’s nice to know the Professors figured it out, too.” Said Hermione, trying to sound humble.

The next morning, Harry heard bits and pieces of conversations. As far as he could tell, everyone was against him again. “Aww, shut up!!” he yelled at a group of second year girls, who fled the common room. And this was just what happened in Gryffindor Tower.

Heading into Potions, he was confronted by Seventh Year Slytherins coming out and not a word of support from Seventh Year Gryffindors. His first sign of support came out of Greenhouse Five in the form of Luna Lovegood “I believe in you, Harry Potter” she said, dreamily “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back and you fought him.”

“Thanks, Luna” Harry replied, sincerely

Hermione rolled her eyes and muttered "Great, this coming from the girl who only believes in things that don't exist and whose father runs a crackpot magazine"

"I'll thank you not to insult my father" said Luna, suddenly very clear eyed. She turned to walk away.

Harry grabbed her arm and said "Luna, do you suppose you could get me a subscription?"

"I'd be happy to, Harry" she said. Her dreamy look reappeared as she left.

Harry glared at a shocked Hermione "She believes me. And you weren't very nice" he said, critically.

"That was nice, what you said, Harry" said Ginny "Luna's a little strange but underneath, she's nice"

Harry was surprised at hearing that "That's the first nice thing I've heard from you in days" he observed.

"Well I" Ginny began harshly. But, then she softened "I'd like to get back to the way things were. Can we talk after dinner?" Harry grinned, then remembered his detention with Umbridge.

Before he could answer, Ernie MacMillan declared his full support for Harry. "And I think all of Hufflepuff believes every word he told Sue" Susan was smiling quite broadly.

"Her again, Harry?" Ginny asked coldly.

Harry didn't bother answering that "Look, I wanna talk to you too. But, I can't right after dinner, I---"

"Well you decide when you can fit me in to your busy schedule" she countered and started to leave.

Harry grabbed her arm and spun her around “I’ve waited three days for you to want to talk to me. You can wait a couple of hours” he said angrily

“I’ll see if I have time.” Ginny fired back “Now, let—go—of—me!”

Harry did so “Yeah, God forbid I’d interrupt your time with Finnegan” he taunted.

“What’s that mean!?” demanded an angry Ginny. Harry just walked into Herbology class.

An uncomfortable Hermione stood next to him and whispered “Uhh...Harry...where did that come from? I mean, Seamus is tutoring Ginny. Nothing else is going on and her grades are improving”

“First, I don’t know that, because she’s barely talked to me in a week” Harry whispered back “Second, practically every time she has lately, its been to jump down my throat and it usually has something to do with Susan. So I’m just giving her a taste of her own medicine”

Professor Sprout started the lesson by saying “This year is most critical as it is your OWL year. Now have any of you started your books yet...How sad...well ten points to Gryffindor, Miss Granger and the same for you Mr. Longbottom. At any rate, this year we are covering some of the more dangerous and poisonous plants in our world. Can anyone tell me about Devil’s Snare?”

“Devil’s Snare consists mostly of vines” Ron answered when he was called on “It inhabits caves and other dark places because it hates sunlight. The best hope of escaping is moving very slowly. Struggling will only get you strangled faster. The spell luminous horem is another way to escape as Devil’s Snare reacts to it as if it were actual sunlight.

The Head of Hufflepuff beamed at him and praised “Well done, Mr. Weasley, well done! Twenty points to Gryffindor!!”

“Do you think you could stop hanging around Susan so much, Harry?” Hermione suggested as class let out “I mean...at least until---”

Hermione didn't know Susan was right behind them “Is that what you want, Harry?” she asked.

“No, Sue, it isn't” Harry said “I'm not going to choose between friends”

“But, Ginny still saw that kiss” Ron argued.

“Kiss?” Susan wondered. Then remembered “That was...I was thanking Harry because he backed me up with Justin”

Harry gestured and said “See! It wasn't that important!”

“What'd you say, by the way?” asked Hermione.

“Well, Justin was calling me a slag and Harry told him maybe he should let a snake attack him” Susan replied, though, she did have to conceal a look of disappointment. The truth was that kiss meant something to her.

Ron almost tripped himself laughing “Maybe you should just hiss at him a few times” he suggested.

“It'd be fun to watch him jump” said Susan with a giggle.

“Back on topic” Harry grumbled “So, what if I stop talking to Sue. Hermione kissed me goodbye at King's Cross in June. What if Ginny decides she doesn't like that? Should I tell Hermione to go away?”

No one really wanted to answer that, so that was the way it was left.

That night, at the Hufflepuff table Hannah Abbott was faced with a Susan Bones who was in deep thought “---So, anyway, did you know you're starkers---” she commented

“Huh! Wha!!” the redhead exclaimed. One arm clamped around her chest, then she relaxed “Gimme a reason not to hex you into next week” she whispered harshly

Hannah laughed “How about because you haven’t heard one word I’ve said for the last ten minutes.”

“Couldn’t be” Susan grumbled “I was thinking”

Hannah snorted “That explains the smoke then. Rumor has it you had a serious chat with a group of Gryffindors. And I note, with interest, that while Harry is absent Miss Weasley is present and rather close to a certain Fifth Year.”

“Yeah, noticed that, too” said Susan emotionlessly “Harry’s got detention with Umbridge. And I think Hermione and Ron have noticed, too. Its gonna break his heart. Merlin, I hope we’re wrong.”

The next day, and the day after that, Harry withdrew further and further. He was sullen and silent in class. At first, Susan thought he was just dropping her. But she’d caught bits of shouting matches. As a side note, Harry’s girlfriend was acting less and less like she was. On the third day, after scarfing down breakfast, she headed for the Gryffindor table.

“What she’s doing isn’t---“ Ron was saying.

Hermione, very unsubtly, ran a finger across her throat and hissed at Ron “Phhfft!”

“Ron, Hermione can I join you?” asked Susan as she sat down.

“Actually, if you don’t mind. We were---” Hermione started.

Susan cut her off, forcing a giggle from Ron “You were either trying to figure out if there’s something going on between Seamus and Ginny. And if so, what to do about it. Well...I’ll tell you what I’ll do. If I can prove it I’m going to tell Harry.”

“Mind your own business, Bones” Ron growled



Susan ignored him and continued "Or, you think something's going on in his detentions with Umbridge. What?" She eyed Hermione.

"Maybe we should tell her, Ron"

Susan turned toward Ron and asked "Well?"

"Harry's got these scratches on his right hand" answered Ron "He told me not to tell anyone. But they look like the lines she's been making him write."

Susan turned an impressive shade of red "What's the matter, don't know that one?" she whispered harshly "Look it up! It was invented in 1502! Now...Harry won't tell you, right? ... Well, leave that to me!"

"Read something you haven't?" Ron snickered as he watched the Hufflepuff girl depart.

Hermione was lost in thought, then she snapped her fingers "Ahh! Got it!" she exclaimed "Inventions of Great Magicians by Adolphus Malfoy!"

"You'd trust something a Malfoy wrote?!" Ron questioned, outraged.

Hermione gave him an icy look "Ronald...it was written a century ago. Besides, these are historical facts." She lectured.

"Whatever" Ron countered "Anyway, you'll have to wait til after dinner"

Hermione shook her head and said "Oh, no Ronald. We can forgo lunch to look in the library" Ron groaned.

Later that day, Susan was waiting outside the Defense classroom, trying to decide if she was sure she wanted to do what she'd planned. It wasn't something that was in her nature. "Eeep!" she squeaked when someone tapped her shoulder.

"Ahh...sorry" Harry apologized "Listen, Sue, I'm sorry for the way I've been the last couple of days."

She patted his arm and asked "Are you alright? You don't really look well."

"Yeah, just a lot on my mind" he replied.

Susan knew an evasion when she heard one. "Don't worry about it, Harry" she said "You know, my offer is still open"

"Actually, I do need a favor" he said "If its not too much trouble...that is."

Susan figured it was about Ginny, or Umbridge "Anything, Harry" she replied.

"Mmmm...anything...?" asked Harry, his eyes strayed from her face.

Susan felt blood rush to her cheeks "Did Harry Potter just flirt with me?" she teased.

"I...err...what I...mean is...ahh sorry?" he stammered

Susan put her hand to her mouth and giggled "I don't mind...A bit flattering, actually. Kinda wondered if you knew I was a girl."

"I did...that is...I...ahh...do" Harry felt like he was drowning.

"Well, that's good" she said "Anyway, what did you need?"

Harry exhaled "Right, well, its not just for me. You see, its Hermione's birthday next week and I haven't been allowed to Hogsmeade. I'd really like to get her something nice."

"Want me to get something? Do you have something in mind?"

Harry offered her a handful of Galleon coins and said "You know Hermione and books. Or maybe something a girl would want. I dunno,

if you see something really good and if its more I'll pay you back...Shhh...here they come!"

"You can count on me" whispered Susan as she discretely pocketed the money. She wondered if Harry realized how much he'd given her. Susan could tell Hermione had already done her research, so she ignored the look of concern and walked into the classroom. Ten minutes into class Susan allowed her head to fall onto the desk. She ignored it when Hermione poked her leg.

"ARE WE KEEPING YOU AWAKE MISS BONES!?" a furious Professor Umbridge demanded as she slammed a yardstick on Susan's desk.

Susan looked up sleepily and replied "Well, since you're not teaching anything, I thought I'd take a nap"

"Then, since you've obviously completed the chapter kindly describe the proper wand movement to defend against the curse on page sixty." Umbridge said in her sugary tone.

Susan glared at her with narrowed eyes and said "Why don't you tell us, since you're the teacher"

"Come up here at once!" Umbridge demanded, shaking with rage. She wrote in harsh, jerky motions and handed Susan a note "You will take this to your Head of House and report back here at five in the afternoon!"

Susan looked at the note and turned it a couple of times "Awfully hard to read, did you ever learn to write?" she taunted.

"Considering that I deal with your Aunt Amelia on a regular basis, I should think she would have explained to you that I am not the type of person to cross" the professor sneered.

Susan laughed nastily and said "Oh, she described you alright! And she was right! You are a lazy, fat, stupid toad with delusions of godhood!!"

The whole class gasped.

“Oh and you’re short too!” all of 5 foot 3 inch Susan concluded before she walked out ‘Well that landed me in detention. Now what do I tell Professor Sprout---wonder if woman troubles will work.’

The Great Hall exploded in applause when Susan appeared. Naturally, the Faculty Table sat there looking stone faced. Were there a few brief smiles, though? Hannah Abbott ripped the air with the loudest whistle. How could the thin blond do that?

“SIIILLLENCEEE!!” Professor Dumbledore’s magically amplified voice overrode the ovation after a minute “I BELIEVE YOU HAVE DETENTION MISS BONES”

Susan, already blushing from the applause, nodded, grabbed an apple and started eating. She grabbed a second one for later.

“And where did that come from?” Hannah confronted her friend.

Harry was heading their way, so Susan whispered “Tell ya later”

“That was something to see” he said “Ready to face the music?”

Alone with Umbridge. The students were ordered to seats and both received quills “You, Mr. Potter know your assignment. Begin at once” then she turned to Susan and asked “Quite the center of attention weren’t you, missy?”

“Just telling the truth” Susan shot back defiantly.

The professor offered a sickly sweet smile and said “You, my dear, clearly need an attitude adjustment. You will write ‘A Ministry sponsored education is the only way’ until I tell you to stop”

“There’s no ink” Susan pointed out. She noticed Harry watching her.

Umbridge gave another of her sweet smiles and ordered “Quill to paper, child. And now begin. I hope you understand how it hurts me, but it is necessary”

“Oww!” Susan groaned

“Is there a problem?” Umbridge asked.

Susan shook her head and resumed. After she’d done it twice, she stopped and asked “Harry, is yours writing in blood?”

“Yeah” replied Harry, through gritted teeth.

Umbridge frowned and said “Silence, both of you! Back to work!”

“No!” Susan shot back “Harry, these are Blood Quills and they’ve been illegal for centuries! I’m taking this to Professor Sprout!”

Umbridge went for her wand, but Harry was faster. He blasted her off her feet. “You’re sure about this?” he asked

“Remember who my aunt is?” Susan replied.

Together, they headed for Hufflepuff Tower. Susan’s tale took a few moments, but Harry’s was longer. By the time they were done the plump professor was full of fury. She led them to Professor Dumbledore’s office, where the students repeated it again.

“Harry, please tell me why you didn’t bring this to myself or Professor McGonagall.” The Headmaster asked.

Harry’s resentment poured out “Why didn’t you look at me at the trial!? Why didn’t you say anything after it was over!? Why haven’t you talked to me at all, since!? And what about the sodding Dursleys!? I AM NOT GOING BACK!!!”

“I see” he said mildly “We will have to address this with the Minister”

Professor Sprout shook her head “Insufficient, Headmaster. What was done to these children is criminal. At the very least, she should be fired at once”

“Sadly, it is not that simple, Pomona” Dumbledore replied.

"Then, Headmaster, I call a meeting of the Heads of House" she said formally "And I can assure you that, regardless of the outcome, none of my students will attend that monster's classes."

Susan, who hadn't exchanged ten words with the headmaster just stood there staring. Harry found the whole thing rather enjoyable to watch.

The official word was that Deloris Umbridge had resigned. She departed early in the morning on the assumption that she could slip out quietly. But many students were there to cheer her departure. Professor Dumbledore took over Sixth and Seventh Year Defense classes, while the Heads of Houses took over Fifth Year and down. Why spread very fast. But, whenever someone congratulated or thanked Harry, he told them to thank Susan instead.

"I'm really hoping to fix things up tonight, Ron" said Harry, brightly. It had taken a couple of days, but Harry's whole outlook had changed. He didn't want to fight with Ginny anymore, so after thinking things over with his new cheery view, now that Professor Umbridge was gone, he'd decided to make the first move. Before breakfast, he'd gone outside and picked a bunch of flowers. Ginny would certainly be at the little birthday party the Fifth Years were doing for Hermione "A butterbeer or two will set a good mood. Plus the flowers, and we'll be right as rain."

Ron, more torn up than ever, gave his best friend a smile that didn't reach his eyes and said "I hope so, mate. But, if it doesn't we'll all still be friends right."

"Of course" Harry replied, optimistically "Why shouldn't it be?"

"Oh, no reason" Ron said in a rush. "Its just, well, its been a couple of weeks and Gin can be...well...stubborn and..." He almost told Harry what he suspected, but the words wouldn't come. "You know us Weasleys and our tempers" he concluded rather lamely.

Harry dismissed it with a wave "Poppycrock, to quote Hermione" he said "A party's a perfect time. Oh...that reminds me! I gave Sue

money the day Umbitch got tossed out so she could get Hermione something for me. I'll see ya there."

"Sure Harry" Ron said, unenthusiastically. Watching Harry leave, Ron suddenly didn't feel hungry. He shoved his plate across the table causing it to splatter on the floor.

Harry paced outside the entrance to Hufflepuff Tower until it opened. Conveniently, it was Susan with a wrapped present "Hiya Sue, thanks for your help. I really appreciate it" he said "Do I owe you anything?"

"No, in fact, I owe you change back." She replied.

Harry gave her a surprised look and said "Oh, ok, well we can worry about that later. You're coming, right?"

"Oh, I don't think so. Its in your common room" she said.

Harry took the gift from her and said "Come on, after all, you picked it out"

"Alright" she finally agreed "I'll meet you there in a little while. I just want to change. Can Hannah come?" But Harry was already rushing off.

'Gryffindor tower was oddly quiet for a party' Harry thought as the Fat Lady opened for him. "Happy Birthd---What's going on?" he demanded when Fred and George grabbed him. The gift for Hermione fell out of his hands. Something broke "Nice job!" he growled.

"Don't worry about it, Harry" Hermione said quietly "Come on, the three of us can take a walk"

Harry twisted free of the twins and he saw long red hair on the couch by the fireplace. It was obviously Ginny's. He recognized the back of Seamus' head as well.

What happened next took place in seconds. Seamus was kissing Ginny. Harry assumed he was attacking her, so he punched Seamus

in the side of the head. Seamus fell off the couch and Ginny fell on top of him. When she looked up she had blood dripping from her mouth.

“Gin! Are you alright!?” he exclaimed “I didn’t mean---”

Ginny looked down, Seamus was out cold “Real brave Harry, punching someone from behind” she sneered. She wiped her mouth and spit blood at him. “I hate you, Harry Potter!!!” she yelled

“A—bu” he said, shocked by her reaction. Harry looked around helplessly trying to understand what had just happened. It suddenly clicked. “Eh...not the first time you said that” he replied in as uncaring a tone as he could manage “Stay away from me and keep your boyfriend away, too. Slut!”

The room was utterly silent as Harry headed for the exit, until Ron said “Uhh...Harry...you want us---”

“We’re sorry, Harry” Hermione added with tears in her eyes

Barely containing himself, Harry replied “I need to be alone”

“Hey...ahh...what happened to the party?” Susan asked when she and Hannah arrived a few minutes later.

Ron looked up at her and snapped “It got cancelled”

“Care to enlighten us as to why, Weasley?” Hannah shot back.

Hermione stomped her foot “I’ve had enough fighting for tonight! Please, Ron.” She sobbed “Harry and Ginny broke up.”

“Oh?” Susan queried

Ron gave her an unpleasant look, but Hermione said “We may as well tell her. Everyone’s gonna know by morning anyway.”

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## Round Two

While Ron and Hermione were filling Susan and Hannah in on exactly what had happened. Harry was off alone, thinking. It was very late, well after curfew, when he returned. Things didn't look any better for him. He was full of anger. Thinking of Ginny and Seamus together made his blood boil. Re-living the image of them kissing made him sick to his stomach. He stomped into Gryffindor tower feeling worse than he did when he left it.

"Get up! Both of you!" he said harshly to Ron and Hermione, who were sleeping on a couch. Their heads were nestled together in a way that would've amused him under other circumstances. They didn't instantly reply, so he kicked each of their legs.

"Ouch! Yow!" they both complained.

"Oh, shut up!" he snapped "How long have you known about this?!"

They looked bug-eyed at each other, then Ron said "You got it wrong, mate. We thought she was, but---"

"What Ron means to say, Harry" Hermione continued "Is that we had our suspicions---"

Harry cut her off coldly "Always need proof, don't you?"

"Well yeah" she replied, weakly.

Harry crossed his arms across his chest and asked "Well, what now? After what happened over the summer, should I even believe you, or you?" His eyes flashed from one to the other.

"I'm totally on your side in this, Harry" said Ron "I swear I would've told you if I knew. Sister and everything"

Hermione flinched when Harry glared at her "I don't know what to say, other than I'm sorry" she said "Before, I wanted to keep out of it because I thought ---well hoped --- you two would work it out for yourselves. I didn't know if I said anything it would make it better or

worse. But, now --- Harry you're my friend, ever since First Year. I wouldn't trust Ginny now as far as I could throw her. Besides, if its a choice between you and her, then I'd choose you. Every time...especially after this summer. She was the one who got us all in an uproar and I never should've listened. I should've known better."

Over the next few hours, they didn't talk very much. The three Gryffindors just sat there. Ron, or Hermione, would make occasional attempts to cheer Harry up. Only once, did Harry show a faint smile.

It was just after midnight when Professor McGonagall appeared, escorting both Seamus and Ginny. She didn't see the look of hatred that Ginny gave her ex-boyfriend, nor the rather pleased smirk from Seamus "Since you're awake, Potter, come with me!" she commanded. She added, to Ron and Hermione "You had both get to your dormitories at once."

"Yes ma'am" said Ron

Hermione added "Yes, Professor"

"Y'alrigh" muttered Ron when, sometime later, Harry came in.

"Go back to sleep, Ron. I don't feel like talking now." he replied as he undressed for bed. After two solid hours of a Professor McGonagall lecture, plus trying and mostly failing to get his side across, Harry was exhausted. Harry's head barely touched the pillow before he was out cold.

As breakfast ended the next morning, Professor McGonagall stood up and called Harry to the front and announced "No doubt, many of you are aware, in one form or another of what occurred in the Gryffindor Common Room last night. Mr. Potter has something to say to his classmates regarding that incident." She gave Harry a harsh look.

"Last night I found out Seamus Finnegan had a new girlfriend" Harry said "That would be my ex-girlfriend. Since I didn't know it at the time, I thought he was attacking her so I punched him in the head."

There had definitely been different versions already making rounds as the whispering started in the Hall. "Silence!" McGonagall said sharply "You do have more to say, do you not?"

"I asked Susan Bones to pick me up something nice for Hermione's birthday. It was broken last night" Harry continued "I'm sorry for that and I'm sorry to Hermione for ruining her birthday"

McGonagall frowned and prompted "Do you not have something to say to Miss Weasley and Mr. Finnegan?"

"No, Professor" Harry replied "You told me if I apologized to them I'd have one week detention and, if I didn't, it would be three. I'll do the three."

McGonagall gave him her most displeased look and said "Very well, report to Mr. Filch immediately after dinner for the next three weeks. Now, return to your seat."

"Yes, Professor" said Harry, acknowledging her instruction.

He passed Seamus and Ginny as he headed back "You'll pay for this, Potter" said Seamus. His hand on Ginny's was plainly visible. Ginny didn't even look.

"Any time, Finnegan, any time" was Harry's response.

They were gathering their books when Fred and George came up. Harry rather felt the urge to reach for his wand "We'd like a word or two, Harry" said Fred.

"Off with you, Granger" George said.

Hermione shook her head and said "I don't think so. Besides, I'm a prefect, you two aren't"

"Fine" said Fred.

"What actually happened last night, Harry?" asked George.

Harry shrugged "Well, like I said, I thought Finnegan was attacking her. I didn't even think of the other. She just ---got in the way"

"What are you planning to do now?" asked Fred.

"I'm not apologizing to either of them" Harry answered, stubbornly "Ever! If they stay away from me, I'll stay away from them. If not, they're taking their chances."

Ron cut in with "What I think they...ahh we...don't want, is that... well ...You're my best friend, Harry, no matter what. But..."

"I think they're saying is they don't want you fighting with Ginny" Hermione offered.

"I won't go looking for a fight" Harry replied "But, don't expect me to back down, either"

The Weasley boys nodded to each other. Ron spoke for the group "We can live with that."

Transfiguration class didn't go all that well for Harry either. "Potter...Potter" Draco taunted "Not the Weaslette's hero anymore...eh?"

"Is there a problem, children?" Professor McGonagall talked down to both of them.

Then, later "Think she'll let us have a go for a few Galleons?"

It drove Harry crazy. He actually was really tempted to openly agree with Draco. That would've turned a few heads, he thought. But, even thinking that turned his stomach and would infuriate Ron. On top of that Professor McGonagall kept him after class.

"Potter, I am not at all pleased with the way you handled yourself this morning" she said "I believe you are fully aware that I was not actually offering you a choice between detentions. I expected you to apologize to Miss Weasley and Mr. Finnegan."

Harry looked her right in the eye and said "I spent most of the last week having 'I will not tell lies' carved into my hand Professor---"

"I regret that, Potter. I would have stopped it, if I'd known." she replied "But I fail to see any connection"

"To be honest, Professor, I don't really believe that" he said "I was telling the truth when I spoke up in Umbridge's class. But you sent me to detention anyway. So I can't apologize to Finnegan or his girlfriend because it would be a lie."

McGonagall looked away, embarrassed "I didn't ... it affected you that strongly? I'm sorry Harry...and I do mean that. I hope you can come to me in the future if you have a problem."

"Actually, Professor Sprout seems more helpful" Harry said bitterly "And at least Snape's always been honest in his hate for me. Was there something else, Professor?"

The rebuke stung deeply, as a gesture she offered "Report here for your detentions, Harry. Bring homework or other study material. And you are free to go on Hogsmeade visits."

"Thank you, Professor" Harry replied happily, his smile vanished rather quickly, though. The relative isolation of detention gave Harry some much needed time to think. It was also a great place to put together a letter to Sirius – no one to look over his shoulder.

Dear Si-nuffles,

Been an interesting couple of weeks. I got to Hogwarts with a girlfriend. And we got a psycho for a Defense Professor. Well both are gone, now. She slagged off with Seamus Finnegan, my ex, that is. We were having a birthday party for Hermione. When I got there, they were snogging away happy as can be. So I punched him in the head. Actually I thought he was attacking her. Hurray, Harry's a hero again right? Nope, she hates me for interrupting her and her new boyfriend. Best three weeks detention I ever got. At least Ron and the twins aren't holding it against me.

Anyway, ex Professor Umbridge, we nicknamed her Umbitch, gave me detention for saying that Voldemort's back. She had me doing lines of I will not tell lies using a Blood Quill. I didn't know they were illegal. If it hadn't been for Susan Bones getting detention and being made to use it, I'd probably still be. McGonagall was all in favor of detention. Dumbledore doesn't care. YAY Professor Sprout!

I'll go now, got a bit of a headache.

Best

Harry

PS: How's the big guy?

Saturday morning, before breakfast, he sent Hedwig off with the letter. He hit the Great Hall feeling rather happy. At breakfast, Percy's owl, Hermes delivered a letter to Ron.

Dear Ronald,

I felt quite optimistic that your education would be of a much higher quality this year than previous. I was quite distressed to learn of the abrupt and most regrettable dismissal of Professor Umbridge. Things were in the works that would've significantly improved the standards at Hogwarts.

Much needed changes have now been derailed as a result of the lies spread by certain individuals (I believe you know who I mean) about Delores Umbridge. But, I promise you, as soon as the Ministry clears up the matter. The Ministry will be successful in implementing the much needed reforms. Further, it is my hope that Madam Umbridge, who is an outstanding educator and administrator, will be able to return to Hogwarts with a clean reputation.

In conjunction with this, I also strongly recommend that you disassociate yourself from Harry Potter as much as you can. Surely you have noticed instability in the boy, and distinctly violent tendencies.

I had been planning to send a similar correspondence to our sister. But, it is with great satisfaction, that I can report receiving a letter from her that she has already severed her relationship with Potter. I find myself quite outraged over the circumstances. I will not object at all to learn what you and the twins cook up to repay him for his attack on Ginevra. I only regret is that, as a Ministry official, and a legal adult that I cannot participate. Perhaps, between us brothers, we can convince our parents to file charges.

In conclusion, I advise you to read tomorrow's Prophet most carefully. You will likely learn a good deal about Harry Potter that will help you make up your mind. He is most definitely not the person we thought him to be when we welcomed him into our home.

Finally congratulations on making prefect. That is certainly one area I cannot question Dumbledore's judgment

Your brother,

Percy.

"You don't think they'd actually do that, do you?" asked Harry.

Ron looked up and snorted "What, file charges? My parents? RUBBISH! Besides, we'd back you up anyway. Ginny's my sister, but what she did to you was just plain wrong"

"Thanks, Ron, that means a lot" said a very grateful Harry.

That night, Harry heard Sirius call his name and looked around. The fireplace was sparkling and crackling more than usual. "Hi Snuffles" he said.

"Quite a couple of weeks, eh Harry" Sirius observed

Harry gave a single sarcastic "Ha" then continued "Got that in one. Hide for a minute! I'll get rid of whoever that is!"

“What are you still out of bed for?” asked Hermione, she and Ron were back from prefect patrol.

Waving them over, Harry said “Sirius, he should be back---”

“All clear?” came from the fireplace.

“It’s Ron and Hermione” Harry answered.

Sirius greeted them and said “Got an interesting letter from my godson there...Ahhh...He mentioned Ginny in his letter. Are you three ok?”

“She stopped talking to me” Hermione said “Me and Harry are fine”

Ron nodded “I saw the whole thing. Ginny’s my sister, but, what she did---”

“Alright” Sirius interrupted “The less said, the better, probably.”

“Do my parents know?” asked Ron.

Not even the fireplace could hide Sirius’ troubled expression “Yeah, Ron, they do” he replied “I’ve heard arguing and neither of them will say a word to me.”

“Oh” was all Ron could say.

“About Umbridge” said Sirius, completely changing the subject “You might have a better friend in this Susan Bones than you realize, Harry. Amelia Bones packs quite a punch in the government. Officially, she’s number three. But she doesn’t usually agree with Fudge. Your trial would be a fair sample and she comes from a very respected family. That said, your ex-professor is number two.”

Hermione interrupted, saying “But, she used a Blood Quill. That’s illegal and punishable by five years imprisonment”

“With our wonderful Minister supporting her, I’m sure there will never be a trial” Sirius predicted “And I’d bet a small fortune she’ll be back



at Hogwarts this school year. Probably before Christmas, maybe even sooner.”

Harry threw up his hands in disgust “Great!” he complained “Bring back Lupin! Hell! Barty Jr. was a better teacher than Umbitch!”

“Hey Ron, what’s going on?” a sleepy Ginny yawned.

Harry spun his chair around angrily and said “None of your business! Sod off!!”

“NO! I don’t think I will!” Ginny shot back. She glared resentfully at Harry and sat down.

“Fine!” Harry snapped. Looking straight at Ginny, he asked “So, Hermione, do you happen to know who’s single in your dorm? I’d like to go with someone to Hogsmeade and I wouldn’t want anyone to cheat on their boyfriend.”

“You’re one to talk!” Ginny shot back “Playboy-Who-Lived!”

Harry was confused for a moment but remembered it was the title of Rita Skeeter article. “That was last year. Try some original material” he sneered

“Wait til you see what’s in tomorrow’s Prophet” Ginny informed them.

Harry just shrugged “I’ve been hearing things like that from Malfoy for years. You were the one going around behind my back.”

“Drop dead Harry!” Ginny said hatefully.

In the same tone Harry countered “You first!”

“SHUT UP BOTH OF YOU!!!” Ron roared “AND STAY THE BLOODY HELL AWAY FROM EACH OTHER!!!”

Harry looked a little ashamed. But Ginny gave her brother a defiant look and said “You’re not my boss!!”

"I'm a prefect" he pointed out "Go to bed, Ginny!"

Ginny crossed her arms and said "NO!"

"Ten points from Gryffindor" Ron announced. When Ginny didn't move he threatened "Wanna go for fifty?"

With a nasty look that swept Harry, Ron and Hermione, she turned and left.

"Sorry Ron" Harry mumbled

"I think now would be a good time to point out with everything going on you're all better off together than at each other's throats" Sirius offered

"Good night, Sirius" said Harry as he headed for the stairs.

Sunday morning! Harry's first chance all year to go to Hogsmeade! He woke up to an empty dorm and realized he'd overslept. He was cornered by Cho Chang "Morning" he said breathlessly.

"Hi Harry" she said "You and Ginny Weasley are officially broken up, right?"

Harry rolled his eyes at her impatiently and sarcastically asked "Where have you been the last week?"

"Well, I wanted to make sure...I thought maybe we could...err go together, that is" she replied, hesitantly. Harry made little more than a half nod before she grabbed his hand and dragged him along. "Great! Let's go!" she said enthusiastically.

Harry was hungry, but every time he tried to stop, Cho kept tugging him along, until he realized where she was leading "Uh-uh, no way" he denied, stopping cold and refusing to budge.

"But, its Madam Puddifoot's" Cho half whined.

Harry shook his head "Never again, look Cho, lets call it bad memories ok" It was a half truth. He didn't hate the place because he'd been there with Ginny. They both hated it and had escaped as quickly as they could.

"Oh, sorry" she subsided "Where then?"

"Well, I didn't have breakfast. So about anywhere is fine" he replied. Harry dug in to a hefty meal, while Cho ordered a salad and water. Harry decided she must not be hungry because of breakfast.

They just chatted while eating. When the waitress came, Harry paid the bill. "I miss Cedric" Cho said with an abrupt sob.

"Err...sorry" Harry said, uncomfortably. He patted her hand.

Cho's whole demeanor suddenly changed "You liked me last year, didn't you Harry?" she asked "I mean when you asked me to the Yule Ball?"

"Uhh...yeah" he replied, surprised by the two sudden changes in conversation.

Cho put her other hand on top of Harry's and asked "Do you still? Like me, that is?"

"I...uhh...well...haven't thought about it...what with everything." He replied

Cho leaned forward, grabbed Harry's face and kissed him forcefully. "Now what do you say?" she asked.

"I dunno" replied Harry "But... maybe we could... take a walk...I've gotta find a replacement for that Susan got for me to give to Hermione. You could help---"

Cho teared up again "I will not help you find a gift for another girl!" she declared before storming off.

"I give up!" Harry growled to himself. He was still staring off into space, trying to figure out the female of the species, when a whole group joined him. He didn't respond until Ron punched him in the arm.

"Earth to Harry! Earth to Harry! Anyone home!!" exclaimed Ron.

Harry rubbed himself and complained "You git! What was that for?!"

"You were way out there, spacey than Lovegood" Ron replied

"If I live to be Dumbledore's age, I won't understand girls" he replied, looking at his friend.

Ron laughed and said "Ahh...take a look around, mate."

"This just isn't my day" he complained as he saw Susan, Hannah and Hermione. He thumped his head on the table.

"Oh stop that!" Hermione said, crossly, pushing Harry's head back  
"What is it now?"

"I ended up here, this morning, with Cho Chang---" Harry began.

"What's wrong with that, mate?" asked Ron

Harry shrugged "Well it is better than Madam Puddifoot's" he admitted "But then she got weird on me. First she cried about Cedric, then she suddenly kissed me"

"That was fast" Ron commented

"NOT THE POINT, RON!" Harry snarled "Anyway, after she kissed me, she took off crying again"

"Did you say anything else, Harry?" asked Hermione.

"All I did was mention that I needed to get a replacement present for your birthday" he replied.

Every girl rolled her eyes at him “Bet he mentioned me, too” Susan commented

“As a matter of fact, I did say you were the one that got it for me” Harry said.

“So, how was the kiss?” asked Ron.

“Soggy” Harry answered

This generated odd looks “Snoggy?” asked an amused looking Ron.

“No, Ron, soggy. As in all wet” he replied. “As in I needed a napkin. I don’t get it”

Hannah was the first to speak “From Cho’s point of view, you should never have mentioned another girl’s name while you were on a date”

“It wasn’t a date” Harry grumbled offering a sullen look “She just dragged me along until we ended up almost in Madam Puddifoot’s. Didn’t much care for it the first time.”

“Never been there” Ron observed “Too pink and fluffy for me”

“That’s what Gi—well you know—said” Harry lapsed into silence.

“On the other hand” Hermione put in “If she really thought of it as a date she shouldn’t have been talking about Cedric either...ahh, no offense” she looked at the two Hufflepuffs uncomfortably.

Susan waved it off, saying “No worries. Look, Harry, you’ve been through a bad time with...ahh...I don’t think you should rush into anything. If she wanted to be with Seamus, she should’ve broken off with you first”

“So anyway, what’re the four of you doing together?” asked Harry, wanting to discuss something else

“Well, Hermione wanted to go book shopping, big surprise---”

“Quiet Ron” Hermione and Susan said together.

Harry snorted in amusement “They are a bit alike, aren’t they Ron?”

“They do have Quidditch books, Ronald” an exasperated Hermione sighed “Come on Harry, it will do you good. None of us want to see you moping about.”

Between them, they all got Harry out of his seat and left the restaurant “Plenty of other girls out there, Potter” Hannah pointed out “And no need to be hooked on Gryffindors, either”

“Something wrong with Gryffindor girls, Abbott?” Ron grumbled.

“Not at all, Weasley, not at all” Hannah replied airily “Its just that you shouldn’t limit your options. Take me”

Ron’s eyes popped out.

“Oh that’s not what I meant” she huffed “I’m not here most weekends because I’m seeing someone at home”

Hermione gave her a sad look and said “Must be tough”

“Why? Because she’s dating a Muggle? Shame on you Hermione!” Ron said, looking outraged.

She gave him a cold hard stare “That-is-not-what-I-meant-Ronald-Bilius-Weasley!” she said in an offended tone.

“No...hehe...but the look on your face is priceless...hahaha”

Hermione scowled as everyone started to laugh quickly as they caught on to the joke “I was merely concerned about the effects of a long distance relationship.” She said in a brittle tone.

“One of these days, she’s gonna hex you, mate” Harry chuckled.

The five of them wandered around Hogsmeade before making their way to the bookstore. They chatted with Neville and Luna, who had

apparently become friends, or more. Turned an extra corner, when Hermione spotted Malfoy looking around for trouble. Today definitely wasn't the day for a Potter-Malfoy clash.

"Come on Harry" Ron urged, "at least we can make the most of it in the sports section."

Just in the door and to the right was a whole section of sports magazines, Muggle and Magical. Dean was there, floating casually about ten feet in the air browsing through football magazines. "Lo Ron, Harry" he waved down "Team's off to a terrible start. Two-naught, Two-naught, and lost a shootout."

"How can you watch a sport like that?" Ron complained "Borrerrrinnggg!"

Dean allowed himself to descend "You know, for someone who enjoys the subtlety and strategy of chess..."

"Please guys, not again" Harry all but begged.

Ron had hold of a Quidditch magazine "Look!" he said excitedly "Wood's up for Rookie of the Year. We need to get all of Gryffindor to vote!"

"So, did McGonagall really give you a choice about apologizing?" Dean asked. "That's kinda been the big question."

Harry shook his head "No, but she saw my reason. And I think it might be good for another biggie." he said, but there wasn't much amusement to it. "Hey, I think I'm gonna check out that government course"

"Yeah, saw a trio of cuties near there" Dean commented "Might join ya, myself"

Ron frowned at him "Who do you mean?"

“Well, I’d know Hermione anywhere. She was one of the shockers of the Yule Ball. I mean WOW! Who knew?” Dean answered. He didn’t see Ron’s frown deepen. “Don’t quite recognize the other two.”

As Harry headed off, Ron answered “A couple of Hufflepuffs, Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott. They started walking around with us.”

“Ahh...OH! Now it clicks!” Dean exclaimed “Rita Skeeter’s article! I wouldn’t’ve minded getting caught up in her----- Aww, hell, this can’t be good!” he added from his bird’s eye view.

Ron pointed his wand at his feet, cast winguardium leviosa and floated up to Dean. “I don’t see anything” he said. Dean pointed at the door which was just opening. They were too near the back to head off the recently christened couple.

Harry and the girls were clowning around. He had learned that Susan was every bit as smart as Hermione, if anything, more so. Susan didn’t work nearly as hard and got similar grades. She was more relaxed about it. Hannah, who was seriously considering a legal career, was scanning a book that caught Harry’s eye. It was called Legal Precedents in Black Magic. He unintentionally grabbed it from Hannah and was going through it. “Hey, ‘Mione, read this” he said “Will it help...err...Snuf---”

The conversation was cut off as Harry got hit in the face with a copy of the Daily Prophet “Here! Read this, Potter!”

“Haven’t you hurt him enough, Weasley?” Susan hissed angrily.

Ginny spun on the Hufflepuff and said “This isn’t your business Bones!”

“Leave, Weasley” Hannah ordered “You too, Finnegan”

“Shut up, Abbott!” Seamus spat angrily “I’m sick of what Potter’s been saying about Ginny behind her back! I want him to stop! Especially since he’s doing exactly what he keeps accusing her of!”



"I've got nothing to say to you, or your girlfriend, Finnegan" growled Harry.

Ginny, confronting him directly, said "Speak to me, Harry! Use my name! You owe me an apology! And Seamus too for hitting him!!"

"Forget it, slag!" Harry said furiously "There's your new name!"

"Real creative Harry!" Ginny snapped back "Especially since she's the only slag around here"

Harry realized she was referring to Susan, outraged he yelled "She's been a great friend for a year! And not just to me! To you too!! She's the one who---"

"You been screwing on the side!" Ginny shouted back.

Ron and Dean arrived in time for that. Dean's jaw just dropped. Ron shot an angry look at Susan and an accusatory one at Harry

"I'm gonna tear your hair out Weasley!" Susan threatened. She moved with remarkable speed, but all that happened was that Ginny had been knocked over. Harry grabbed her around the waist, pinning her arms to her sides. Ron meanwhile similarly restrained Ginny.

"Don't do it, Sue. She's not worth it" said Harry to the squirming Hufflepuff "Finnegan, you seriously better keep your girlfriend away from me."

"Arrogant bastard!" exclaimed Ginny.

Harry released Susan and turned on her "What?" he asked coldly "Quoting Snape, now, are we?"

"He's been making sense lately" she countered nastily "Like son like father, although you're worse! You're so arrogant it makes me sick!! Probably a good thing your parents are dead. Probably spinning in their graves with the way you turned out"

Ginny had infuriated him beyond belief. Only Ron's presence kept him from hauling off and punching her. "Maybe you're right" he growled. Harry grabbed Ginny by the shoulders and pinned her to the wall "But you know what...Your old friend Tom was right about you. You're a Silly... Little... Girl"

Of the students, only Ron even partially understood the reference. Ginny pulled away and fled from the store. "That was harsh, Harry" he said, critically.

"Not compared to being glad my parents are dead, Ron" countered Harry.

"I don't think she meant it that way" Ron said. He followed Ginny.

Seamus wanted to know "What did you say to her Potter?" Harry ignored him, so Seamus grabbed a fistful of his robe and snarled "I asked you a question!"

"Let go or spit teeth, Finnegan!" Harry threatened him.

Hermione and Hannah separated the boys "Right, go find your girlfriend, Finnegan" said Hannah, she had her wand out.

"Give someone a little authority and it goes to their head" said Seamus with a sneer.

Hannah advanced on him "I'm trying to keep from reporting this because Harry's my friend" she said "So this is your last chance to leave"

"Just stay away from her, Potter!" Seamus said, as he turned to leave.

"I didn't start this, you did!" Harry exclaimed.

"All Ginny wanted to show you was the proof of what a git you've been to her. Read the editorials" said Seamus "The title is Harry's got a Harem" And he left the store.

Harry waited until long after Seamus left before picking it up "This is bloody ridiculous" he complained

Dear Editor,

I am a Hogwarts student and I admit I was one of those who believed every word Harry Potter said. But seeing is believing. That so-called accident at last year's Yule Ball was a pathetic cover up. Harry has been two-timing his girlfriend from day one.

No sooner than he'd kissed her, that he was beginning his Harem. If he was so interested in Ginny Weasley then why was he so eager to meet Susan Bones on the Hogwarts express? And can anyone explain to me why I witnessed the exact same so-called accident less than a week ago.

I'm sick of Harry Potter and his arrogant attitude. And I don't want to be part of his Harem. I guess Rita Skeeter was right about him, even if she wasn't right about my name or age.

Signed

Ginevra Weasley, age 14

"So Granger, wanna be part of a Harem" Hannah joked

Hermione seemed to actually consider it, but shook her head "That's quite alright" she said "Sorry, Harry, I like you but not that way"

"Oh bummer" Harry shot back with a playful grin "S'ok somehow I never really saw us together. I think you like redheads, too."

Hermione blushed and gave him a push on the shoulder "Maybe" was all she said "But not a word from you"

"Might be just what he needs. You know, a little nudge." Harry pointed out.

Susan found that exchange rather interesting "Still like redheads, Harry?" she asked.

“A few. Care to take a walk?” Harry replied

Left behind, Hermione and Hannah watched them go. “Well, what do you think of that?” asked Hermione as the door shut.

“I don’t think we’re invited” Hannah observed. They discussed their mutual friends for the rest of the day.

## Reactions

Monday brought a return to classes. The day went alright for Harry until lunch time. He and Ron had had their free period before. They'd been alone in the Gryffindor Common Room talking. Most of the time was spent on the subject of the fight at Hogsmeade. The strain on their friendship had been getting worse with each argument Harry had with Ginny. But, with near-Hermione logic, Harry showed him that he'd kept to his word. Ginny had started each of the arguments since the breakup. The rest of the time they discussed the upcoming Quidditch game against Ravenclaw.

"Leave it alone, mate" said Ron as they entered the Great Hall. Ginny only glared at Harry for a second before looking away. Harry waved at Susan and sat down at the Gryffindor table.

Hermione, with her stack of books, joined them moments later "I trust you two have gotten your homework done" she said imperiously.

"Yes Professor Granger" Harry replied in his student to teacher voice. Ron snorted in amusement. There was still a ripple of laughter among the Gryffindors when owls started to appear. Hedwig landed in front of Harry with a letter.

Harry,

Molly read the Daily Prophet and about went bonkers.

I think a Howler is coming.

Love

Snuffles

"Good, Ginny deserves an earful" said Hermione. But, before either boy could respond to her Errol, the Weasley family owl, entered and dropped a red envelope in front of Harry.

"Ahh...bu...err" Harry stammered, looking at it in shock.

Seamus eyed it gleefully and exclaimed “Check it out, everyone! Potter’s got a Howler!!”

“Mind your own business, Finnegan” Harry sneered at Ginny’s boyfriend. That was when the Howler trembled, so he ripped it open.

HARRY POTTER

YOU SHOULD BE ASHAMED OF YOURSELF! CHEATING ON MY DEAR GINNY!

AND WITH THAT –THAT- THAT- LITTLE HUSSY!!

AFTER WE WELCOMED YOU INTO OUR HOME!!

The letter rasped Harry and shredded itself. He didn’t know whether to be sad or mad. He hadn’t realized how much Mrs. Weasley’s opinion meant to him. But, she was believing everything Ginny said. He gave into anger, slammed his fist on the table and snatched up the remnants of Mrs. Weasley’s Howler. “Nice little story you’ve been spreading.” He said harshly. Harry slapped the letter into Ginny’s bowl of chicken soup and stormed off. Ginny was splattered with a fair amount of the soup.

“I’m sick of this Weasley!” came Susan’s voice “You’re playing with the big girls now!” Susan grabbed a fistful of hair and yanked Ginny off her seat.

Professors Sprout and McGonagall pulled the girls apart. “Miss Bones, you will stop attacking Miss Weasley!” the Head of Hufflepuff ordered.

“And you Miss Weasley” the Gryffindor Head took over “will keep your social life out of the newspapers.”

Ginny’s chin went up in defiance “What happened to free speech?” she demanded.

"Silence child!" Professor McGonagall ordered sharply "Ten points from Gryffindor! Any student reflecting poorly on the reputation of this school can be removed for the sake of the school."

Ginny froze in shock "You'd expel me?" she asked weakly

"Sounds good to me!" Susan declared.

Professor Sprout poked her with her wand "Report to Defense Class, Miss Bones!" she ordered "A week detention and fifty points from Hufflepuff!"

"Sue, come on, I'll walk you to class" Harry offered. Hannah handed Harry her bookbag and they left the Great Hall.

Professor McGonagall pulled Ginny aside and said "Miss Weasley, I will stand up for you. When and if , you must work with me. I refuse to take sides in my students personal relationships, but I have noted that recent incidences between yourself and Mr. Potter have been instigated by you. Stop these provocations and keep your distance from both Miss Bones and Mr. Potter. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Professor" replied Ginny "But I didn't start this"

The Professor shrugged "Perhaps not directly, but need I remind you that your mother's Howler is a direct result of your letter in the Daily Prophet."

"Its not my fault she sent that Howler" Ginny countered.

McGonagall acknowledged the point with a nod "Perhaps we have been too tolerant" she said "I think we'll be reviewing the policy on Howlers. Possibly banning them altogether."

Meanwhile, Hermione and Ron had followed Harry and Susan. "---accusing me of doing the very thing---" she was saying, angrily.

"Easy Sue" Harry said gently "You'll get no argument from me"

Susan threw a punch at empty air in frustration "I could do to her what she's been doing to me" she snarled "More...I wonder how she'd like it if my auntie did it to her father"

"Hold it Ron" Hermione whispered, holding him back from charging into the room.

Harry was shaking his head "And act the way Malfoy always has? I'd rather you didn't. She brought out the worst in me when she said --- what she said--- No matter what's happened, Ron's still my best friend. The twins, too."

"Thanks Harry" said Ron, finally pulling away from Hermione. Then more kids came into the classroom, followed by Professor Snape, effectively ending the conversation. After class, it resumed with an uncomfortable Ron saying "Look, Susan, I don't understand why my sister's acting like this. I'm kinda rubbish with girls anyway...just ask Hermione...anyway...What I'm trying to say...uhhh...ask...You didn't mean what you said? Ruin my Dad?"

Susan looked ashamed "I wasn't thinking, Ron" she said "I'm sorry. You're my friend, too. Besides, Aunt Amelia wouldn't do anything like that."

"Well, this is my life, Sue" Harry commented.

"In other words, I should go away now?" she asked "Because Ginny Weasley and her mother don't like me? Not bloody likely!"

Harry grinned at her "It's just no matter what I do, somehow everything ends up in the paper and it's always twisted up."

"Easily handled with a bit of fact" argued Susan "If you ask me, Ginny's problem is that she believes what she sees in print. Ron, your sister is very naïve. She's just like Justin. He started on me the minute he finished reading the article after the Ball."

Ron looked offended at first, but Hermione said "It makes sense, Ron. Except this time, only she knows why, she did the writing."



“You know, Ron, even seeing her cheating on me we might have ended up somewhat ok--- someday” said Harry “But, after the last couple of days and with that cheap shot about my parents---All I want is for Finnegan and his girlfriend to stay away from me.” The group had made their way to Astronomy.

“Today, class, and for the next two weeks we will be studying the planet Venus” Professor Sinistra announced “Due by the end of October, will be a report in which you will offer examples of ups and downs in your romantic relationships. Obviously, I don’t need all the sordid details. I am interested in your evaluation of the effect of how the planet affected yourself and your significant other”

The class had various reactions, ranging from Lavender and Parvati giggling, to Draco’s proud smirk. Harry just banged his head on his desk

After class ended for the day, the Weasley brothers cornered Ginny and Seamus away from anyone else. The twins dragged Seamus away leaving Ron with Ginny “What’re you doing involving Mum like that!?” he demanded hotly.

“Mind yer own business, Ron!” she countered, giving him a push as she tried to get by.

Ron pushed her back into a wall and growled at her “I can’t believe how much you’ve changed! I told Harry he was out of line with what he said, but maybe I was wrong!! How could you say you’re glad his parents are dead? And it must’ve been you that wrote that stupid article that says Harry cheated on you! You cheated on him!!!”

“That’s bull Ron!” Ginny exclaimed, as she struggled against her brother “Not ten minutes after the---we left King’s Cross--- he ran off with Bubbles!! What’d she do?! Use an engorgio charm on her boobs!!??”

“MERLIN GIN!! Get a grip!” Ron yelled “You heard exactly what Susan wanted. If it you had a problem with it why didn’t you go too!?”

Ginny gave a disgusted noise and countered "What?! And see them all over each other?? No thanks!!"

"For your information, Harry hasn't even told me that they've kissed yet. And you know what? Good on them when they do!" Ron proclaimed "And as for people all over each other, that's you and Finnegan! You should've seen Harry's face"

Ginny spat "OH poor pathetic Harry Potter. About time he got his head deflated. Now, if you're quite finished I'd like to see my boyfriend!!"

"That sounds like Malfoy talking!" Ron accused.

Before Ginny could reply Professor McGonagall interrupted the argument "It appears you were correct, Mr. Malfoy" she declared quite distastefully "Kindly explain yourself Mr. Weasley"

Draco was grinning so widely his face hurt.

Ron subtly released his sister "Nothing, Professor" he lied, glaring at Ginny "Just a family thing."

"Not to me!" she snapped "May I be excused Professor?"

The Head of Gryffindor raised a highly doubtful eyebrow, but to everyone's surprise let them off saying "Very well, I won't impose myself on a family issue. But, and mark this well, the both of you! If there is another 'family thing' as Mr. Weasley so eloquently expresses it, there will be repercussions. I will also contact your parents. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes Professor" they muttered.

With a twist of her head, she ordered "To your dormitories! The both of you!"

"Yes Professor McGonagall" the Weasley siblings muttered as they left.

She looked at the blond boy and said "You are dismissed as well, Mr. Malfoy. Go on about your business."

"Yes, Professor" Draco replied, looking disappointed.

In the Great Hall, Ron sat next to Harry and said "So...listen...Harry...we, that is---me and the twins---"

"That's the twins and I, Ronald" Hermione corrected.

Ron glared at her "Like I was saying---" he continued "We also got letters from Mum. She---"

"No offense, Ron" Harry interrupted "But, I don't want to hear from her now---or ever, probably."

Ron didn't even blink "I don't blame you one bit. She pulled us into it, now. We're supposed to---ahh---How did it go?" he said, going into his robes. He quoted from Mrs. Weasley's letter "Discontinue associating with that untrustworthy individual"

"Oh" said Harry, flatly

At that moment, Harry was tapped on the shoulder "Hey Harry, I just wanted you to know I'm here for---"

"Beat it!" he snapped at the intruder, but it was Susan he saw when he turned "Oh, this just isn't my day" he moaned "I didn't know it was you. I'm sorry"

Susan's angry expression faded "Don't worry about it. Can I join in?"

"Sure---I guess---if you want" he replied, feeling that this was the worst day in his life "Ron's about to tell me this whole thing's cost me three of my best friends"

Ron shook his head "No, Harry, you're wrong. We wrote Mum back and told her no"

Harry's expression was indescribable "Uhh...thanks...ahh...th--- Why?" he stammered "Not that I don't appreciate---"

"Where's Creevey when I need him?" Ron complained "They'll be pissed I didn't get a shot of that face" he ended with a giggle.

"Ronald! That is the nicest, sweetest, most---oh forget it!" exclaimed Hermione as she practically strangled Ron.

"Save me Harry!" Ron squeaked.

"Hmmp" she complained "Emotional range of a teaspoon."

"Wow!" Susan exclaimed "I think there's a Hufflepuff among the Gryffindors. That was really sweet. Your brothers, too"

Ron's ears turned pink "Uhh...thanks...but I really don't deserve it. I turned on you twice last year, Harry" he replied

"And we settled both" Harry pointed out "You're all really going against you mother?"

Ron nodded "Uh-huh, all three of us. Everyone deserves a second chance, that's what they taught us. Mum's not even interested in your point of view. Dad, well, we haven't heard from him yet"

"I should thank Fred and George, too" Harry promised.

"They said they were thanking you, but not for what" Ron was clearly fishing for an explanation.

"It's for a surprise they're cooking up" said Harry. "They didn't even give me all the details. I didn't ask."

Looking disappointed, Ron replied "Oh."

Since food had appeared when they were talking, Susan ate at the Gryffindor table. It was the casual act of dropping a napkin in her lap that made Harry realize he'd been unconsciously keeping a list of the differences between Ginny and Susan. So far, he'd realized a few. He

couldn't remember Susan ever blushing or stuttering around him. The similarity seemed to end with the fact that both girls had red hair. Ginny always seemed ready to think the worst of him, right from the first. Susan, on the other hand, didn't act that way at all. Actually, the only times he'd seen her angry involved Justin or Ginny and of course with Umbridge. Remembering how her face turned red those times made Harry recall the only times she had blushed in his presence. Both were when they bumped into each other. Thinking mostly about the recent one, where Susan had to remove her robe...

"Harry!!" Hermione said sharply, snapping her fingers in his face.

He jumped, startled "Huh—wha"

"Alright, there, mate?" asked Ron "Its like you were on another world"

Harry glanced at Susan and blushed, then looked away. He couldn't get the image of Susan in tight white t-shirt and shorts out of his head.

"Tsk, tsk Bones" Draco said, flanked by his usual cronies "I would've thought someone from such a prominent family in our society too good to associate with the riff-raff. You would do better linking yourself with a pure-blood clan. Your family's past indiscretions can certainly be overlooked." He arrogantly pushed her chin up with a finger and added "Red hair isn't the most appealing, but---"

Harry pointed his wand at the offending arm "How'd you like me to shatter every bone in your arm Malfoy?" he queried.

"Muggle lovers and Mudbloods, no manners whatsoever" said Draco, his voice dripped with scorn "Just a friendly chat Scarhead. Don't cause a scene at dinner...It's rude."

Susan, quite calmly, said "No thanks Draco. You see, my family's just full of Mudbloods and, well---actually--- Muggles." She took Draco's hand in both of hers (Harry didn't like it much) Draco suddenly looked uncomfortable, then shocked, then in pain, then horrified "Go cool off. Let's not have a scene...It's rude" she concluded mockingly. Susan released the Slytherin's hand, it was frozen solid.

“That was bloody brilliant!” exclaimed Ron. He offered to high-five her, but changed his mind. He started laughing

Hermione frowned, saying “You could get into trouble for that”

“Susan Bones, you’re my hero!” Harry announced loudly. He threw an arm over her shoulders and pulled her into a one-arm hug. Hermione hid a pleased grin. She wouldn’t admit to enjoying the rule-breaking, after all, she was a prefect.

George Weasley, on the other hand could “So, we noticed young Mr. Malfoy fleeing the area. Please don’t keep it a secret” he said.

“Granger wouldn’t do something like that” Fred observed “And our baby boy would’ve just punched our favorite Slytherin.” Ron stopped laughing.

George nodded in agreement “Must’ve been Harry. C’mon! Tell!”

“Nope, wasn’t me” said Harry as he wiped away tears of laughter “She did it”

The twins traded looks of disbelief and, together, said “No way! Not a little Hufflepuff!”

“Gimme your hands” Susan offered, holding out hers. She clutched the offered hands tightly for just a second. Both twins yelped and pulled away, tucking their hands under their arms. Susan offered a playful smile and added “Sorry, family secret”

“Ain’t it cool?” Harry quipped.

Susan groaned and slapped his knee “That was bad, Harry.” She scolded.

“Coulda been worse” he joked, then “Can I walk you back to your Common Room? By way of the lake?”

“Not exactly the direct way” said Susan, there was a faint pink tinge in her cheeks.

Harry smiled, recognizing the blush and said "That's sorta the point, Sue."

"Ahh!" Susan exclaimed brightly "I'll be right back" With that, she practically ran for the Hufflepuff table.

Harry followed her with his eyes and watched as she bent over Hannah Abbott. They talked into their hands at each other, giggled, looked over at Harry, giggled some more, pointed his way, giggled again. "Was that a yes or a no?" asked a baffled Harry.

"Got me mate" Ron replied "Don't know a thing about girls, meself"

Hermione spared Ron a stony look before saying "That's the truth. And don't worry, Harry, unless Hannah was completely wrong the other day---Nope, here she comes."

"When did you talk to Hannah?" Harry asked curiously.

Hermione's reply sounded harsh, but she was grinning "Last weekend, in Hogsmeade, after you and your new girlfriend abandoned your best friends in the bookstore"

"She's not my girlfriend" Harry retorted "---Yet!"

"Not too confident there, Harry?" Hermione commented.

Ron chuckled and added "Cocky, actually"

"Hey! That's our routine!" Fred complained.

There was laughing until Susan arrived "Did I miss something?" she asked.

"Nothing, nothing at all Lady Ice" the twins said, bowing out of her way.

Harry had stood up, he offered an arm and said "Shall we?"

“Didn’t know you were such a gentleman” she teased “lead the way”

Harry laughed as they started walking “I guess my time with you-know-who did me some good” he said.

“How can you joke about Him?” asked Susan, looking slightly disturbed.

Harry snickered “I wasn’t thinking of Voldemort...I was thinking of my ex.”

“You don’t really think she’s that bad, do you?” she asked, flinching at the feared name.

“Actually, no” Harry admitted “But after what she did, and some of things she said, I hate her. But Voldemort is definitely higher on the list.”

Still serious, Susan said “I want you to know in advance---I was pissed off at what that Howler said”

“Oh, I know that” Harry commented with a chuckle “You girls can be vicious. I’ve seen Hermione and Ron go at it” he shivered.

“I’ve been working on a letter to the editor” she said.

Remembering Ginny’s letter, Harry cringed “Ahh...can I ask you one thing?”

“What’s that?” she queried

“Its fair, after all she did it first” he started, anxiously “Just don’t put anything in it that isn’t totally true. And let me tell Ron in advance.”

Susan nodded and said “No problem, here’s a copy. Hannah’s making sure mine doesn’t break any laws; including the totally true part. Nothing but pure fact.” She pulled parchment from her robes and handed it to him.

“Thanks” he said, tucking it away.



Susan gave him a confused look "Are you gonna read it?" she asked.

"Later I will. Right now lets just talk...get to know each other...I mean...you know more about me than I do about you" he said, then he laughed.

Susan nodded and said "That's probably true. What's funny?"

"I was just thinking back to First Year." He explained "Right after McGonagall gave me the Seeker spot, Hermione --- This was before we were friends --- took me and Ron to the trophy room. She said Quidditch was in my blood and showed me and Ron when Gryffindor won the Quidditch Cup. My Dad's name was there as Chaser in 1974 and 1976, then Captain and Seeker in 1977. Ron said it was creepy that Hermione knew more about me than I did."

They reached the edge of the lake, so she asked "Which way?"

"Doesn't matter, Sue" replied Harry with a shrug "You choose"

She pointed and answered "Left."

"Ok" he replied "Any reason?"

"Not really, just that I'm left-handed" she answered. Harry gave her a big smile. "What?" she asked.

"That's my first Susan Bones fact" he replied, cheerily "Oh, I know one. When's your birthday?"

"April 29th" she replied.

Rather nervously, he asked "How about your...er...parents?"

"Alive and well, Harry" she replied, picking up on his tone of voice "My Dad, Neil, runs a butterbeer making plant. My Mum, her name's Joan, works there part-time as a Potions Mistress. The Company keeps offering her the job of Chief Potions Mistress. But she won't until Tina starts Hogwarts. Quite the useless Mudblood, isn't she?"

Harry knew sarcasm when he heard it "Yeah, kinda like Hermione, never amount to anything that one" he said. They shared a laugh "Think maybe she'd wanna replace Snape"

"Who Hermione?" asked Susan, jokingly.

Harry gave a panicked look and exclaimed "God no! I can see it now" In the best imitation his deepening voice could manage of his female friend he said "Due Monday twelve rolls of parchment on the uses of dragon's blood!"

"Shame on you Harry!" she giggled "At least it wouldn't be---Bones! Twenty points from Hufflepuff, for being one minute late and fifty points from Gryffindor for breathing Potter!"

Harry laughed at the image she'd created in his head "Your Snape's worse than my Hermione. Snape's more like --- Ten points to Slytherin, Mr. Malfoy, for being twice the git you usually are to Scarhead" He managed a fairly good imitation of Snape's curled lip.

"Now THAT was creepy, Harry" she said, faking a shiver.

The teenage wizard saw an opening and put his arm around her shoulders "Getting cold?" he asked innocently.

"Not very subtle, Harry" the teenage witch commented. "That didn't mean move it!"

What had been a smirk turned into a big smile "Ok, so, any more in the family, Sue?"

"Older brother, actually" replied Susan.

This time Harry shivered and grumbled "Thought I had enough of older brothers to last a lifetime"

"Frank's nothing to be afraid of, he's a big softie." She didn't comment on the reference to Ginny "Besides, he lives and works near London"

“With my luck, he’s Mad-Eye’s personal apprentice and bigger than Hagrid” said Harry still not convinced.

Susan burst out laughing and kept laughing until she couldn’t breathe “Now...you’re being... ridiculous... Harry!” she panted. After resting, she continued “First, he’s only a little taller than you---”

“Why’d you say he was big then?” he interrupted.

“Merlin! Look at me!” she replied “There’re some Third Years taller than me!” Then, calmly, she added “Frank’s a Squib”

Harry held up his hands in surrender “Ok...ok...sorry” he chuckled “So what’s he do?”

“Frank...he’s a car repairman” she replied “He’ll be really impressed, actually. He knows all about the Boy-Who-Lived”

Harry couldn’t help rolling his eyes “Look...Susan...I don’t wanna be the Boy-Who-Lived. I’d give anything to be just Harry” he said “All I remember about that night is my Mum scream, a green flash and pain. Someone else wants all that fame, they can have it. Just gimme back my parents. It’s getting dark, we should go back to the castle” He started walking, quickly.

“Stop! Harry, please! I don’t understand” she said, almost running to catch up “We’ve been having such a good time”

Harry stopped “We were, weren’t we?” he sighed “Maybe I overreacted. It’s just that I’d been thinking about ... well...her...and the only thing that made sense was something Ron said about her having a thing for me forever. And I remember the first time I saw her. I was over the Weasleys during the summer after First Year. She stared at me for a few seconds, squeaked and ran upstairs. She was like that until we started going out.”

“Well, that’s a definite difference between her and me. I only squeaked once with you around and it wasn’t even about you” she said.

Harry raised a questioning eyebrow "Who?"

"Second Year. Lockheart" she replied, blushing.

Harry tried to repress a laugh, it turned into a coughing fit "Not you too" he complained "Every girl in the bloody school sighing and giggling, drove me batty."

"How'd that crush on Cho work out?" she teased.

Harry grimaced and cringed "Very wet, Sue, thanks for reminding me."

"Who's cold now?" she asked, putting an arm around his waist.

"So, you think we might try seeing each other?" asked Harry.

"I'd like that, Harry" replied Susan "Been waiting for that for over an hour now. Look we're back at the castle again"

Harry wrapped his arms around her.

"I could get used to this" she sighed. But, when he tried to kiss her she stopped him saying "Sorry, Harry, not until the second date."

"Hmmp" he snorted. "Doesn't this count? Hogsmeade last Saturday and tonight?"

"Nope" she countered, impishly "Remember, you didn't take me to Hogsmeade"

"Girls have weird rules" he groused.

Susan patted his cheek and said "There's a real simple way to solve that, you know."

Harry gave her a confused look.

"Ask me out again, you dummy!" she exclaimed, poking his chest.

"Oh, ok" he said "So, Susan, I---I mean---you know there's a Hogsmeade trip on Saturday."

She giggled "So I heard"

"Anyway, can I take you on the Hogsmeade trip?" he asked, feeling just a bit frustrated.

Susan giggled again "Sorry for giving you the needle Harry" she said "Yes, I would love to go with you"

"Aww...that's alright" replied Harry, he was a little embarrassed that she noticed that. "I guess we should get in before curfew, huh." Walking Susan to Hufflepuff Tower, Harry felt quite pleased with himself. "Well, good night" he said.

Susan stopped him and kissed him lightly, but lingeringly, on the lips.

A pleased, but confused Harry said "I thought you said no kiss until the second date."

"No, I said you couldn't kiss me til then" she explained "Never said anything about me kissing you. Night Harry!" She pushed away and ran through the Hufflepuff entry.

In the Gryffindor Common Room, Hermione was tutoring Dennis Creevey in Astronomy. Sitting next to them were Colin and Ron. Harry walked in with a barely faded smile and a spring in his step. "Well, it looks like that went well!" Hermione said cheerily.

Harry nodded, grinned, and said "Uh-Huh"

"Ya kiss her yet" heckled Ron.

Harry scratched his head and said "Err...I'm not sure, actually" He sat down to join the group

"I thought you had enough experience to know if you kissed someone or not" Hermione teased.

From the other side of the room, Ginny yelled “Shut up about him and me, Granger!”

“Stop butting in to other people’s conversations!” Hermione fired back “And fifty lines of I will show proper respect for a prefect Turn it in before classes start tomorrow!”

Ginny stood up, red with fury.

“One word and you can add a detention with Mr. Filch” Hermione added in a diamond hard tone “Go to bed, NOW!” Several younger students disappeared to their dorms as well, including Colin and Dennis.

Harry whistled appreciatively “Wow, what brought that on?” he asked.

“Haven’t you heard the petty little jabs she’s been taking at me?” asked an irritated Hermione. “Anyway, doesn’t matter. Tell us what happened with you and Susan.”

“We talked” he replied “She’s got an older brother and a younger sister. Her parents work for a butterbeer maker. Oh—I bet your Dad would like her brother, Ron. He’s a Squib, he repairs cars.”

Ron shook his head unhappily “Not a good idea, mate” he said “Me and the twins have seen how Ginny starts these fights. Like with Hermione, just now. Mum just believes Ginny. So do Bill and Charlie, I heard. Dad thinks its one big misunderstanding and that you two will work it out.”

“I’m really sorry, Ron” Harry said remorsefully “I never would’a dated her if I’d known this could happen. You should know that Sue is really pissed about both that letter in the Prophet and your Mother’s Howler. She’s sending in one of her own. She gave me a copy tonight.”

Ron read the offered letter and sighed “Well, its all true” he said “And she even says she’ll take veratiserum. EWWW!! That last part! More information than I needed!”

"Its not anything bad, Harry" said Hermione, who had been reading over Ron's shoulder "Its actually really nice. Its just snort you might be squeak a bit heehee embarrassed." She hid her face in her hands and her shoulders shook with silent laughter for a minute. She didn't even notice when Harry yanked it away.

Dear Editor

Thank you for giving me an equal opportunity to speak out against the slanderous remarks made by Ginerva Weasley. I have never dated Harry Potter! Not once have I kissed Harry Potter! That girl is a jealous child and, in my opinion, foolish. I have been in at least two classes with Harry since the day I started at Hogwarts. This year its four. I can't say I was his friend all that time, but I was last year. Still, you get to know someone when you spend two or more hours a day in the same room. I've seen him happy, sad, angry, depressed, even --- sorry Harry---acting like a jerk, but every year he's faced some scheme by V-CENSORED. It would never even occur to Harry to cheat on her

And what happens now? He gets called crazy, unstable and all kinds of other things by the same people who called him a hero. SHAME ON YOU! Most of all, shame on both Ginevra and Molly Weasley for believing that sh-CENSORED! Go out with a boy, find out its not working. FINE! Harry deserved a lot better than finding out by seeing her snogging away with someone else in the Gryffindor Common Room!

Something they both forgot – If it weren't for a brave Second Year, Ginerva Weasley would have died three years ago. Harry's been a better friend to her than she deserves. For that matter, so have I.

One more thing, I better never see my name in another of these letters or hear my name in a Howler from either of them. If I do, my family will take legal action!

I'm willing to be questioned under veritaserum about my statements. That said, now that Harry IS single, those intense green eyes are too sexy and, well, let's just say I might become more of a Quidditch fan.

Signed

Susan Amelia Bones

"Whew! That was something" he mumbled, knowing his face was burning "Except, Hermione, why is everyone so crazy about my eyes? I mean, they're my mother's color. And I really don't get that last bit"

Ron snickered and said "So you admit to the stuff at the top."

"Could say the same for you, mate" Harry fired back.

"Isn't it your night for patrol?" Hermione huffed "Or would you rather listen to me explain?"

Ron grabbed his robes, said "No, thanks" and departed.

"Your eyes, Harry, tell a lot about you" she explained "I can tell how you're feeling. Like Susan said at the beginning, happy, sad, depressed. When you're angry, they're a little scary, they remind me of little emerald fire. Like floo fire, only darker. Those passionate looks you used to give...ahh...Ginny. I sometimes wished you'd look at me like that."

Harry blushed a bit "I did once, actually. At the Ball. You looked really nice in that dress. Maybe you should stare at ...ahhh...someone a bit more ...errr...obviously."

"This isn't about me!" scolded Hermione, as she looked away. She turned back without a trace of blush and continued "The part about Quidditch, I'll just say that its not only your eyes she thinks are sexy. You're not angry are you?"

"Bloody hell! Are you nuts?!" he exclaimed. "You know, when we bumped into each other this year we had to just remove our robes. She's got great legs and her ches---"

Hermione clamped a hand over his mouth and said "You can tell Ron all about it, eh"



“Right sorry” he muttered, then “Here’s a bright spot. Since I won’t be talking about Ginny we won’t have to worry about the whole older brother thing.”

She eyed him curiously then asked “When did you start using her name again?”

“Huh? Oh” he began “I saw how mad she was the first time I called her Finnegan’s girlfriend when McGonagall had me up before the school. And remember how she yelled at me to use her name?” Hermione nodded. “Well she’s gonna get that every time she starts with me.”

“For how long?” she asked.

Harry shrugged “Eh...dunno...” he replied “Maybe someday I’ll call her Ron’s little sister again. Enough about Ginny. Do me a favor. If she happens to ask, don’t tell Susan I read this, ok”

The next day, instead of going straight to lunch with Ron after their free period, Harry was waiting outside the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom for Hannah Abbott “What’re you doing here?” she asked.

“Waiting for you, actually” he replied. Before he could explain, the Headmaster came out, they locked eyes before he walked away. “Nice talking to you, too” he said coldly.

“That was...err...interesting” Hannah commented.

“Dumbledore’s been doing that to me ever since my trial. You’d think an old man could be more mature” Harry grumbled. Then he forced the anger away and smiled “That’s my problem, forget it” he said “I’m more interested in discussing Susan”

They started for the Great Hall more slowly than the rest of the class “You’ll have to understand, she’s my best friend, Harry. So I’m not gonna reveal any secrets.”

“Just looking for good ideas for Hogsmeade” he replied “Come on, Hannah...I’m sure you know I asked her.”

Hannah looked rather amused “The way I heard it, she had to ask her to ask her”

“Yeah, about that, what exactly is the difference between her kissing me and me kissing her?” asked Harry.

Annoyingly, her answer was a shrug and “Not my place to say, you’ll have to ask her.”

“ha ha” replied Harry sarcastically “I do want this to go well”

“Then my best advice is just relax” Hannah said “You worry too much, Harry. Walk around the village, go to Florian’s. I know she told you a lot about herself last night. Give some back. All most of us know about you, we learned from books.”

Nodding thoughtfully, Harry replied “MmmHmm, thanks Hannah. Tell Sue I’ll be over in a while. I’m gonna eat with Ron and Hermione.”

Luckily for Harry, today's Defense class was taught by Professor Sprout. He would surely have lost a slew of points had it been Professor Snape, or even McGonagall. The rotund Head of Hufflepuff had tapped his head with her wand “Eyes forward, Potter!” she scolded “Yes, I know Miss Bones is a lovely girl.”

“Sorry Professor Sprout” he muttered, tucking his head into his chest. The second time it happened, she deducted a mere two points.

At the end of class she spoke to Harry, “Potter, in the interest of your education...you may have one hour after dinner then I expect you to report to Gryffindor Tower to study. Dismissed”

Waiting for him outside were Ron, Susan and Hermione “So, Harry, just in case you were trying to keep it a secret. I say don’t bother” Ron commented.

“She didn’t give you detention, did she?” Hermione worried.

"Nope, I just have to do homework in the tower tonight." He replied "She wants me to study without distractions."

Susan crossed her arms over her chest and said "So its all my fault, huh!"

"Yup" Harry replied, grinning "Looking forward to tomorrow" His eyes strayed from Susan's face.

"Up here, Harry" Susan said.

Harry blushed and replied "Oh, err, sorry."

"No biggie" said Susan, dismissing it. With a wicked grin, she whispered "They are something, aren't they?"

Harry's jaw dropped. He tried to speak, but all that came out was a gurgling sound. He tripped and fell flat on his face.

"Harry!" squealed Hermione, shocked. The redhead gave an amused giggled drawing an angry shout "Susan! He could be hurt!"

Harry rolled over and said "I'm fine, Hermione. Just help me up."

"Up you go, mate" said Ron, bending down and offering a hand. He pulled Harry to his feet. "Wha'appen?" he asked.

"Just tripped" Harry said out loud "Thanks for the lift, mate" He whispered in Ron's ear "Tell ya later"

Ron blinked, suspiciously, but replied "Any time, Harry."

"Sure you can make it, Harry?" asked Susan in a teasing tone.

"Keep it up" he grumbled at her "So, since I got all night with Ron and Hermione, can I join you for dinner tonight?"

When the quartet entered the Great Hall and split into pairs a conversation started with Professor Snape sneering "Well, well, well, looks like our famous trio are going their separate ways."

"I would thank you not to make derogatory remarks about my students, Severus" Professor McGonagall growled "Perhaps we should have dug more deeply into Potter's other charges concerning--"

Professor Dumbledore cut her off in a kindly but firm voice "Minerva, you are fully aware that, by long established custom, Headmasters interfere in the running of Houses as little as possible."

"My gratitude for your support, Headmaster" Severus replied "I trust the meddling in how I run my class will also be coming to an end." His lip curled up, looking at his fellow Head of House and he added "Particularly in how I conduct my Fifth Year class."

Dumbledore was about to reply when Professor Sprout spoke up "I had planned on addressing this at our next gathering, Albus. First, I've always thought Severus's disdain for House members mixing is silly. His attitude toward other Houses visiting the Slytherin table tends to isolate his House. Worse, he passes this onto his students. Miss Weasley, for example, has had a long term friendship with Miss Lovegood---."

"As Headmaster Dumbledore said, Pomona" Snape interrupted "Headmasters, traditionally, do not interfere with how Heads run their Houses. That being the case, another member of the staff certainly has no say in the matter. Wouldn't you agree?"

With barely restrained fury, she snapped back "Just who do you think---"

"Pomona, peace" Dumbledore cut her off "That is something definitely for another time. What is your main concern at the moment?"

The Herbologist sighed "Very well, Albus, if I can't help improve things for Slytherin students, then I will fight for my students. I previously accepted your judgment when it came to detentions and

point deductions. Minerva and Filius are consistent so I have no complaint there. Severus, however, has always punished other students more harshly than his own. One of mine, in particular, has been Miss Bones who is a diligent if not straight O student. The only reason I can determine is that an alphabetical accident landed her next to Mr. Weasley.”

“How dare you!?” Severus demanded.

Again, Albus found himself cutting off one of his Heads “Be quiet, Severus. Pomona you are aware that in addition to allowing Heads to administer their Houses freely. I’ve allowed a free hand in the classrooms as well. The issue between Mr. Potter and Professor Snape is the rare exception and not the rule.”

“And that led us to the Delores Umbridge situation.” She replied harshly “And perhaps Severus can explain why the very girl that sits next to Harry Potter’s closest friend happens to lose points and get detention nearly as often as Harry himself. Or is it just a coincidence?”

“We should continue this later, I believe.” the Headmaster declared “I will meet with each of you separately tonight. And then, as a group. Do not expect to turn in early.” With that, he left the Hall.

Professor Sprout forced a smile onto her face and finished her meal. Then, as normal, she departed walking down her House Table. A comment or a greeting here and there helped keep students under control. She nodded a greeting to her old friend’s niece and the young man who was becoming her new beau. She briefly wished she was a third, alright a quarter, of her current age. Not wanting to deal with even grading papers, and knowing it was going to be a long night, she composed a letter.

Dear Ami,

Well, October is almost over. After this week, I see an interesting pattern. Your letter was a little too innocent. I told you about that very detailed version of the night He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named returned.

Well, I've traced that to Sue. Only an eye-witness would know that much.

Now, my favorite 'Puff is often to be found at the Gryffindor Table. Just as often, one of my visitors happens to be a rather well known young man. You do the math.

Mind you, I'm not questioning the match. They do make a handsome couple. Its your method. How could you think it would be a good idea to have them discuss THAT, of all things? Then again it apparently worked, so what do I know? They're going to Hogsmeade tomorrow, I'll let you know what comes back to me.

Love

PomPom

## The Date

“Up and at’em!” Harry heard from a distance. He ignored it.

Ron shook his head, “Uh-uh Dean, that’s no way to wake him” he said “Watch and Learn...Gee I’m sorry Susan, Harry’s sleeping in today. What? Go with you? Sure I’d love to”

“Uhh? Wait!” Harry said sharply, but groggily. He frowned at his best friend.

Ron snickered at him “Rats, missed another great face!”

“Ha...ha...hilarious Weasley” he grouched “What time is it?”

“Just nine, you got plenty of time, Neville and Finnegan are in the showers.” replied Ron.

Harry nodded his thanks and said “See ya at breakfast.” After waiting about ten minutes, Seamus was the first one out. He shot Harry a contemptuous look, which Harry was only too glad to return.

“Hear you traded down Potter.” Ginny’s boyfriend sneered.

This was the first time Ron hadn’t been around. Harry had bit his tongue a number of times because of Ron’s presence “Been enjoying my sloppy seconds, Finnegan?” he fired back.

“You two wanna fight? Swell!” an angry Neville snapped “Just get the bloody hell outta my way! I’m not missing my date!”

Harry thought that made lots of sense. He definitely had better things to do today and the last thing he wanted was to get in trouble. So, he let Neville pass and headed for the shower. If Seamus said anything else, Harry didn’t hear it. Harry put on the new black jeans he bought in Diagon Alley, and a collared t-shirt with the Hogwarts crest embroidered on the breast pocket. He spent ten minutes fiddling with his hair, which absolutely refused to co-operate. Harry went to the Hall and discovered breakfast well under way. Some kids were finished, even, and wandering around. He spotted Susan, with

Hannah of course, and waved. He indicated he was going to be with Hermione and Ron. Hannah made an odd gesture of biting her knuckles and giggled at her best friend. Harry shrugged it off and sat next to Hermione, who was across from Ron.

"What took so long, Harry?" she fussed "We thought you were going to be late!"

Ron shrugged "Well, maybe she did, I didn't"

"No big deal really, just had to wait for a free shower and Finnegan thinks my date's a step down from what's-er-face" Harry replied. "Plus I can't do squat with my hair."

"Face me" Hermione ordered "I'll see what I can do. Now, about Seamus, why don't you report the incident to McGonagall?"

Coincidentally, Ginny was walking by just then "After the Dursleys, Malfoy and Riddle's annual attempt to kill me, somehow Finnegan and his girlfriend just don't count."

"Sod off Harry!" Ginny snapped. She stomped her foot at him, hissed and left. She'd learned not to make a big scene in the Great Hall.

Just as Harry was done chewing his last bite Susan and Hannah came over "About ready, then?" she asked.

"Yep" Harry said with a nod "What are you doing today, Hannah?"

The blond Hufflepuff laughed and said "In other words, don't be where you are, right? Don't worry, Harry, I'm going home for the weekend. I'll probably be most of them."

"Well, have fun" said Harry. He was rather embarrassed to have been caught so easily.

"Yeah, same here, Harry" Ron chuckled "We sidekicks know when to get scarce, right 'Mione"



The bushy haired girl glared at him "Mione?" she said as if she'd swallowed something nasty "I don't think so. But, yes Harry, we'll probably see each other a few times. After all, Hogsmeade isn't London."

"Well, gotta go" Hannah put in "Details by tomorrow. Don't do anything I wouldn't! Bye Harry."

Susan blushing replied "Thanks for the freedom!"

"What was that all about?" asked Ron

Harry nodded in agreement "Good question" he said, looking at Susan.

"Hermione gets it, I think" she answered "And, we'll talk about it privately, Harry" Despite the firmness of her voice, she couldn't look him in the eye.

"ATTENTION, PLEASE!" the Great Hall thundered with Headmaster Dumbledore's voice "ALL STUDENTS WITH SIGNED PERMISSION SLIPS MAY NOW HEAD TO HOGSMEADE! HAVE A PLEASANT DAY!"

After handing his, from Sirius, to Professor McGonagall Harry waited for Susan. They joined hands and followed the stream of students.

"Not that I ever doubted you, Seamus! But its really something when you see it!" said Ginny quite loudly.

In the same tone, Seamus replied "Yeah, and that shirt tells you why Potter suddenly got interested in Bubbles Bones, don't it! If you happen to like THAT TYPE!"

"Oh really" Susan said coldly. She'd been gently urging Harry along, but she'd heard quite enough "These are the difference between a little girl and a woman" she said, pushing her breasts up "And a woman needs a man and not a little boy!"

Everyone who could see or hear her burst out laughing “Ten points to Hufflepuff!” Lee Jordan declared from between Fred and George

“Now would be a good time to kiss me, Harry” she whispered as she fit her body to his.

Harry only kissed her cheek, though “No, Sue” he replied, huskily “I’ve wanted to snog you senseless since I saw that t-shirt again. But, not now.”

“Ok” she replied, disappointed “Let’s get to the village, then.” They walked to the village in silence. Except for the rather frequent pat on Susan’s back from a passing student.

Madam Rosmerta greeted them the moment they entered the Three Broomsticks. She was in a serving wench outfit, anticipating bigger tips from today’s Hogwarts clientele. “Greetings, Harry! Back for another year!” she enthused. “A pity you didn’t bring your handsome red-haired friend. But, then again, a brother would interfere with roma--”

“Good to see you, too” Harry cut her off “Madam Rosmerta, this is Susan Bones. Susan this is Madam Rosmerta. Do you have a booth available? One that doesn’t get walked by a lot?” He slipped her a Galleon coin.

“I do apologize, dear” she said to Susan “There is a certain similarity between yourself and one of Harry’s --ahhh-- friends. First round on me then. What’ll ya have?”

“Pumpkin juice, please” said Susan “Thank you”

Madam Rosmerta looked at Harry and said “Butterbeer, right.” Then left.

“I swear, she almost turned green” Harry giggled.

Susan laughed right along “Bloody hysterical!” she exclaimed.

“You cursed!” said Harry, more than a little shocked.

Susan looked at him curiously and asked "So?"

"Well, after five years of Miss Don't Call Me Mione. I guess I'm not used to girls cursing" he replied.

Susan laughed at that "She is wrapped a little tight isn't she?"

"She's my best friend, along with Ron. But if you stuck a lump of coal up her arse, in two weeks you'd have a diamond" Harry replied. Already laughing, from Harry's previous comment, Susan completely lost control.

Madam Rosmerta arrived with their drinks and, seeing Susan in tears, asked "Is she well?"

"Oh, fine, just a little crazy" Harry joked.

It was a minute later before Susan calmed down enough to talk "You just had to quote Ferris Beuller, didn't you?"

"It fit, didn't it?"

Susan nodded, still grinning, then it faded "So, about earlier, why didn't you kiss me?" she asked.

"You know how everything I do gets in the news, sooner or later" he replied "Well, it's that I didn't want to-- y'know--put on a show." Harry blushed "Besides, I didn't know if I'd be able to control myself after seeing you lift your...like that."

Susan, remembering exactly what she'd said to Seamus, and what she did blushed too. "Didn't think of that. I see your point." She admitted, bashfully "But, I would've stopped you if you'd gotten too fresh...It is possible to stop the great Harry Potter"

"I remember that quote, too" he replied "You wouldn't stop me if I kissed you now, then?"

"It was fun watching you go crazy when I kissed you. I think you're a little far away over there, though" she observed.

Harry shrugged as he got up "Slide over a bit and tell me more about my eyes" he said with a wicked smirk.

"You read it!" she exclaimed. "Just for that, I won't tell you."

"No big deal" Harry replied as he slid in beside her. He put one arm behind her shoulders "I was wondering, though, how come you wear that t-shirt? I mean it is pretty tight."

Snuggling in close, she replied in a teasing voice "You like it, don't you?"

"Yeah, I do" he blushed "but that doesn't answer my question." Harry, however, decided the answer could wait. He tightened his arm, leaned down a little and kissed Susan. His free hand wandered down her arm, to her waist where he discovered that the t-shirt also didn't quite cover her stomach. Especially the way she was leaning over. He deepened the kiss, and finding more and more bare skin, his hand pushed further up beneath Susan's t-shirt.

Susan contemplated the story of her lucky shirt. How nothing bad had ever happened while she was wearing. She didn't have a chance to get out even a word. "Wel--" was all she managed, then "Mmmm" Her arm tingled and Harry's light touches raised goosebumps all over it. When his hand came to rest on her side, Susan wrapped an arm around his neck where she found a sensitive spot to stroke. Her side burned where he caressed it. "Cool it--Harry" she said, breaking the kiss. She blocked his hand from moving any further.

"Got--a--little--carried away" Harry panted. He noticed her hand on the one that had crept up her shirt. He withdrew it "Really got carried away, sorry Sue" he apologized.

A discrete cough interrupted them, it was Madam Rosmerta "Would you like a refill, dears?" she asked.

"Please" Harry replied "That's a Butterbeer and a Pumpkin Juice."

The inn owner nodded "Coming up" she said "Oh and by the way, you beat the snogging tour minimum plus a minute and five"

"Err...thanks" said Susan. Her cheeks were stained pink and her lips were a little puffy. After Madam Rosmerta left she added to Harry "Didn't know it was that long."

"Me neither, I wasn't keeping time" he shrugged.

Susan gave a silly grin and observed "Time flies when you're having fun. I imagine I look a mess."

"You look beautiful to me." He replied

"Very sweet, Harry" she said "But, I'm not going out with the freshly snogged look. I need to go to the loo."

Harry stood up to let her out "Hurry back" he said. As his eyes followed Susan to the ladies room, Harry decided that things were off to a pretty good start

"So, where are Ron and Hermione?" asked Neville Longbottom. He was accompanied by Luna Lovegood.

Harry looked up and shrugged "Either the bookstore or the Quidditch store, I guess. Have a seat"

"We don't want to sit on anyone" Luna said in her airy tone of voice.

Neville looked highly confused "Huh?" he asked.

"Why, Nevie darling, isn't it obvious?" she replied "Harry is sitting with his invisible friend."

"Nevie!" asked Harry, greatly amused

Neville colored and said "Ahh, Luna, please can't you use Neville?"

Luna gazed at him with wide eyes and said "You didn't mind, yesterday in the Astronomy To--"

"That's private!" Neville whispered harshly.

Harry almost cracked up, but stifled it. He would've felt sorry for his friend but, clearly Neville was having some fun dating the unusual Ravenclaw. "There's no one invisible, Luna." He explained patiently "The Butterbeer is mine, and the Pumpkin Juice is Susan Bones' She'll be back in a minute." Harry summoned the glass to him and it slid into his hand "Go ahead, have a seat" and he couldn't resist adding "Nevie"

"For a little while, I guess" Neville said tightly "As long as you...you know"

Harry nodded and said "Listen about this morning--"

"Hey, what's going on?" asked Susan from beside Harry.

While Susan sat next to him Harry explained "While I was waiting for you, they showed up and we started talking. Sue, you know Neville, right?"

"Yeah, the earmuffs in Second Year Herbology" said Susan with a playful grin. Neville blushed painfully at the memory. She laughed lightly and added "You drive Hermione crazy, you know. Its your fault she's not number one in Herbology."

Neville shook her hand, replying "Nice to meet you--I mean, that is I remember you from class...but we never talked, really...err before."

"I understand, Neville" she replied "Seems to be a common habit among the Gryffindor male. Doesn't it, Harry?" She smirked at him.

Harry nudged her shoulder before continuing "And next to him is Luna Lovegood. She was in the same car on the Express."

"Oh, I remember" Susan acknowledged "You're in Ravenclaw? I just figured you were a Gryffindor, with that hat. Lovegood-- Lovegood"

why is that familiar?" she thought for a minute, then "Oh! I know! The Quibbler! My sister likes the creatures in it. And my Mum is always trying the recipes."

Luna gave her a big smile and said "Oh I like you! You can be my friend!"

"Err...thanks" the Hufflepuff replied. Then she whispered in Harry's ear "Is she...ahh...normal?"

Harry shrugged "Luna's different" he whispered back "But she's cute, right Nevie"

"Cut it, Harry" Neville growled.

Harry held up his hands and giggled "Sorry mate, it's the Butterbeer."

"I really need to bring the good stuff here" said Susan

"What's better than Butterbeer?" asked Neville.

Susan shook her head sadly and said "Oh you poor deprived people. I'll just hafta write Dad. Have you even heard of Kinnison?" Blank expressions were her reply "I'll see what I can do."

"That's the company your parents work for, right?" asked Harry. Susan nodded, pleased that Harry had been paying attention "I thought Butterbeer was Butterbeer I didn't know there was more than one brand" he added.

"Well, its made on the Isle of Wight" she explained "And all of it goes to Ireland. Its cheaper to make it in Britain and send it there."

While the two couples were chatting, a large flight of owls arrived at the Hogsmeade post office with copies of the afternoon Daily Prophet. Word spread like lightning about Susan's letter. The usual delivery of three hundred completely sold out in an hour. Unaware of the excitement, Harry and Susan decided to leave. Their presence on High Street was quickly noticed.

“As much an attention seeker as your new boyfriend, eh Bones” Draco Malfoy taunted. The only difference was that, instead of Crabbe and Goyle on his heels, he was accompanied by Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bolstrode.

Harry released Susan’s hand, all prepared to tangle. But she blocked him “Calm down” she said “Look, Draco, all I want is for her and her mother to shut up. Now, there’s no need for us to quarrel. Let’s shake on it.” She offered a hand.

“NO!” the blond boy shouted in a panicky voice. Then, recovering his dignity, he said “I wouldn’t touch a blood traitor” The Slytherins quickly departed.

“Nice” Harry praised “I didn’t want you touching him either, anyway. I guess the paper’s out, huh.”

Ernie MacMillan, the Hufflepuff Fifth Year Prefect, and Laura Madley were next on the scene “You shoulda seen’em!” he exclaimed “Weasley looked like a blast-end skrewt!”

“And Finnegan! I think he hated that you left out his name, Sue!” Laura concluded. Also a Fifth Year, she shared the dorm with Susan and Hannah. “It’s like you stole his five minutes of fame!”

Susan laughed “Never thought of that” she said. A crowd had developed around them. “Look, everyone. All I wanted was to get my side out and stop her dragging my name through the mud.”

“Seems like Ginny was about right” said one disgruntled voice.

Susan spun toward the person “Who the blo—” she broke off in surprise at having to look down “Who ARE you?” she demanded

“Romilda Vane” the girl in a Gryffindor t-shirt replied “Looks to me like--”

Susan cut her off “I heard you the first time! Thought you had to be a Third Year to come out on the weekends”



"I am!" Romilda replied indignantly.

Hermione had finally made her way through the knot of people "Right, everyone! Break it up before someone starts complaining!" The appearance of a few shop-owners caused the students to disperse.

"So, how're things going?" asked Ron

"Ran into Luna and Neville" Harry answered "They seem to be pretty tight"

Glancing at Susan, Ron persisted "Aaaannnnndd?"

"Scratch one off the snogging tour, mate" Harry whispered.

Susan joined in asking "You talking about me?"

"Probably" Harry replied, cheekily "Shall we go on--" He started. But he was interrupted by a piercing pain coming from his scar. The temperature dropped and three Dementors could be seen on High Street near the Shrieking Shack. Harry tossed off the pain, pulled his wand and focused on his happiest thought --Thanks for the kiss, Susan! "Expecto Patronum!" he yelled, expecting to see them blasted from existence. The white stag wiped one out, but the others charged him.

In the distance was the Dark Mark visible in the sky.

Hermione and Ron, seeing Harry in danger pulled their wands and charged after him. Susan paused a moment before following. The remaining students and Hogsmeade residents looked on in shock and fear. Ron and Hermione were thrown back into the crowd and Harry and Susan vanished with the Dark creatures.

"They disappeared! Dementors CAN'T apparate!" screamed Hermione.

Ron struggled to his feet and added "That was a Banishing Charm! Dementors can't do that! They're wizards!"

From within the crowd another pop of someone disappearing could be heard.

Susan was backhanded across the face as soon as they apparated, she had the brief impression of an alley before her head impacted the ground.

Harry screamed for her and struck back. He had seen an ordinary human hand. He swung with all his might and hit her attacker in the chest. He heard several bones crack, then he screamed in agony as pain told him that he'd shattered his hand. As he fell to the ground the beating began. Kicks and punches rained down on his body. Just as he was about to black out he saw Susan retrieve her wand.

Susan was barely conscious, she saw Harry being beaten savagely. The only curse she could fix on was "Avada Kedavra!" It missed. However, at that moment, she heard voices approaching and the two attackers disappeared. Susan struggled half-way to her feet, but fell over again.

Several people crowded into the alley. Hermione shoved a middle aged wizard, who seized her arm and scolded her "No pushing, girl"

"Let'er go, git!" Ron demanded. He smacked the back of the man's head.

Hermione lashed out, knocking over a half-dozen people "SOMEBODY GET A DOCTOR!" she screeched like a wild banshee. Seeing Susan, stumbling around with blood dripping from her head, Hermione forced the Hufflepuff down "Sit!" she ordered "Here! Press this and hold!" She covered the wound with a handful of tissues and put Susan's hand to it.

"Na—me—Hry" Susan said weakly.

Ron cried out then "MIONE! I THINK HE'S DEAD!"

"No way in hell!" she replied, rushing over. Thanking her dentist parents she examined him "Pulse--slow but strong. Breathing--weak. Pupil response -- normal. Jaw--broke, ribs I think, arms, legs, hand."

Ron whipped out his wand and snarled at two sudden intruders "THE HELL YOU WANT?"

"Easy lad" one man said "We're both Healers"

Hermione looked up and repeated everything she noted, then "Please help him, save him" she begged, she finally broke down. She scrambled out of the way and grabbed hold of Ron.

That was when a dozen Aurors arrived in the company of Madam Bones "Question everyone here. I want guards at both ends of the street. Stun anyone attempting to leave. No one enters or leaves without my personal approval"

"We must get this boy to the hospital" one of the Healers said, indicating Harry, who was now strapped to a long floating board.

Still slurring her words. Susan asked "Howzee?"

"Alive...and stable...at the moment"

There was a flash from Madam Bones "Here, a portkey" she offered

"No!" the other Healer, exclaimed "We'll have to get there on foot! Its much too risky!"

Madam Bones nodded "Very well, but you'll be accompanied by two Aurors...Miss Tonks, Mr. Moody...escort them and stand guard"

"Me too!" Susan Ron and Hermione said with one voice.

Madam Bones, or Ami, as her closest friend referred to her had not had the opportunity to read her personal mail this morning. And so, was a little out of date as to the happenings at Hogwarts. Her niece registered for the first time. "Go ahead" she said "Keep your wands at the ready" The teens moved off, but she called back "Susan, I hope you know we will be discussing this. And I don't just mean whatever happened here."

"Of course Auntie Ami" replied Susan with downcast eyes

'Auntie Ami' rolled her eyes and waved her off. The first thing she did was order all Hogwarts students to return to the school, except for those in the crowd at the alley. The Head Boy was given a letter informing the school that those students would be sent along as soon as possible. Many witnesses reported seeing a green spell racing out of the alley. It was early evening before the interviews were completed and the alley was scoured for evidence.

On reaching the small Hogsmeade branch of St. Mungo's an argument reached Madam Bones' ears "--not discussing this with non-relatives! There is something called Healer-Patient confidentiality!"

"Best friend should count for something!" Ron argued

And just as Madam Bones opened the door Susan said "Well, I'm his girlfriend!"

"Hello, Healer, they are merely concerned after all. Amelia Bones" she introduced herself and offered her hand. She looked at Susan and her eyebrow climbed to the brim of her hat.

"A-a-a p-pl-pleasure m-ma'am" he stammered "H-healer Bole, a-at y-your service"

"Call me Amelia" she replied "Now, Healer, please what did you find and what is Mr. Potter's current condition. Would I be able to speak with him?"

Stutter gone, he answered "Not now, ma'am, the patient will be unconscious for a week at least, maybe two. Ahh...this really isn't for children"

"Let me worry about that. Please continue"

Healer Bole sighed "Very well. All things considered, he was lucky. No vital organs damaged. But a horrific number of bruises, hundreds everywhere. Eyes swollen shut. He'll need ten new teeth. Multiple

fractures of most major bones. Our only course was to remove the remnants at regrow from scratch, both arms and legs. A very tricky repair for the patient's jaw, but since he is unconscious we can take our time. Finally nine broken ribs. Believe me, he's much better off not awake"

"He will recover, then?" asked Hermione.

The Healer looked at Madam Bones before replying "Well, the odds are good. But, to be perfectly honest, his life is still in danger and there isn't much more we can do."

"Healer, can we see him, please" asked Ron timidly.

After thinking, he replied "Well, I don't really see what harm it can do. But, one at a time. And no loud noises. Be warned, though, his appearance is--"

"While the kids are there, Healer." Amelia said "We need to address security. I'm going to post at least two guards, day and night" Bole tried to protest, but she cut him off "I know, he's your patient and its your hospital. But, you have to understand that Harry Potter is no ordinary boy and that this is my investigation. Until the criminals are in Azkaban his life will be at risk. Am I clear?"

Bole nodded and replied "Yes ma'am"

"Well, its been a busy day, hasn't it?" she commented when the kids returned. "You're the last ones we need to question for now. Can you handle it now?"

Ron and Hermione went first and told what happened right up to the point where Susan and Harry vanished. Then finishing with finding the pair in the alley "I'm not in trouble, am I Madam Bones?" asked Hermione.

"You mean for pushing those people?" replied Amelia "Of course not. Bunch of rubberneckers anyway"

Hermione giggled, then laughed at Ron's confused face "Muggle thing, Ron" she said "I'll explain later"

"And you're both certain about the spells?" she inquired "You weren't merely pushed. And, possibly you were dazed and didn't see the Dementors apparate. They merely flew off."

Both Gryffindors shook their heads "No way Director Bones" Ron insisted.

"Excuse me, ma'am , but here is one other piece of evidence that proves the ones that grabbed Harry and Susan were human" Hermione added. "Well, logically, a Dementor wants to suck a person's soul. I read all about them in Third Year and never has a victim been beaten like Harry was."

Amelia nodded thoughtfully "There's one other fact I picked up from all the witness statements. There was definitely one Dementor present. Because it was affected by Harry's Patronus." She commented "I would say that's fairly conclusive. But it does beg the question of his ability to destroy Dementors. That is unheard of."

"Actually, it's not the first--" Ron began.

Hermione clamped a hand across his mouth "Ronald!" she hissed.

"Let him continue, Miss Granger" Amelia ordered

Ron pushed her hand away and said "With respect, Director Bones, no. You'll have ask Harry." Ron flinched under her glare which, in Ron's opinion was more than a match for Professor McGonagall's. But he didn't say another word.

"I agree with Ron and Hermione, Auntie Ami" Susan put in "I saw ordinary hands and shoes. Dementors don't have feet. sob They float. They stomped on him over and over sniff I just wish I hadn't missed" For the first time she started crying.

Amelia held her niece while she cried. Meanwhile her mind raced through all the witness statements. One common thread was the

green spell that had raced out of the alley and dissipated over the village. All the facts clicked into place “You used the Killing Curse didn’t you?” she asked.

“WHAT?” Ron and Hermione exclaimed together.

“I-I didn’t know what else to d-d-do” Susan said between wracking sobs.

“Shut up both of you!” Amelia said, with a disgusted look at the Gryffindors “Look at me Suzy-Q” she said gently, using the girl’s childhood nickname. She conjured a large tissue “I want you to stop crying and talk it through with me, alright.”

Susan wiped her eyes, then blew her nose long and loudly. Then she handed the tissue back to her aunt. “O-ok” she blubbered

“First, what happened when they got you to the alley?” asked Amelia. She repressed a grimace when the soiled tissue landed in her hand and tossed it away.

Susan sobbed and sniffed again before answering “The man holding Harry slammed his knee--into sniff Harry’s ...ahhh...”

“I get the idea, sweetie”

Susan rubbed her nose “Harry didn’t even scream sniff he just fell. The look on his face was awful. They laughed and started hitting him. The man holding me...I bit his hand... He threw me against a wall. I fell and hit my head on something.”

“My poor Suzy-Q” Amelia said softly, comforting her by rubbing her back. “Now, what made you use the Avada Kedarva?”

“I didn’t know how long I was out” Susan continued “They were still hurting him. My wand was there, on the ground. And it was the first thing I thought of, I just fired”

Amelia first looked at Ron and Hermione “I want you two to pay attention to this as well” she said “I know you’ve read this before,

sweetie, but I guess you need to hear it now. Self defense is entirely justified. The only crime committed today was what happened to you and Harry. You'll probably have a hearing where you'll have to repeat the story, but that's all. And, remember, you didn't actually kill anyone."

"Who would want to do this, auntie?" Susan asked, her eyes were all red and teary. "Harry's the nicest boy I know"

"Sherlock Holmes said murder rests on three things" Hermione said "Means, Motive and Opportunity"

That was the first time Madam Bones smiled at either of them "Very good, Hermione" she praised "But Susan's question is where investigators usually start. You two are most likely able to give me a fair list of who would wish Harry harm. You, yourself might be a suspect."

"Hey now!" an outraged Ron exclaimed.

Rubbing his shoulder, Hermione said "It's alright, and she's right. At this point it could be anyone. Let's assume I have a motive. Did I have an opportunity? No, I was with you all day. Which by the way, covers you, too. And means? I can't control a Dementor. Madam Bones can, though, she's a high Ministry Official."

"Yeah!" said Ron in support

"I apologize if I offended you, Ronald. But, very often, the attacker and the victim do know each other." Not at all offended, Amelia acknowledged "Yes, I can. And I'll offer a motive. Suppose I don't like the notion of my niece dating the victim. However, one I was in my office all morning where at least twenty Aurors saw me. And, two, as it happens I didn't know about the relationship. At least until I got here. We'll be discussing that, young lady."

"What about the Death Eaters Harry said were with Who-Know-Who" Ron suggested.



Amelia nodded "I can open investigations of some." She said "Others, well, it would have to be subtle and strictly off the books"

"Something you're missing Director." Mad-Eye said "Been listening to your conversation. And I have to wonder if this assault was only about Potter."

"How do you mean, Alastair?" she asked

"Why the girl?" he asked, pointing his staff at Susan "Why not Granger or Weasley?"

Susan flinched, first from the staff, then from what he said "Ummm...Professor...does that mean you think someone might be after me?" she asked, looking deathly pale.

"I'd prefer you not frighten my niece" Amelia said, coldly.

Mad-Eye ignored her and turned to Hermione "What about it, Granger? Who do they have in common? You were doing good, don't let me down."

"Professor Umbridge" she replied "She hated Harry on sight, she probably hates Susan even more, you too Madam Bones" For an instant she looked at Ron

"If she had anything to do with this I'll roast that toad alive" Madam Bones fumed

The old Auror snorted "Can't think of anyone else?"

"No" Hermione said faintly.

"Fine" he growled "Read the paper this afternoon, Director?"

Preventing Amelia from replying Ron answered "Seamus Finnegan or Ginny Weasley. Figured that out a while ago. You're a real git, Moody" He got up to leave, but just as he reached the door it burst open. "The bloody hell you want, stupid toad?" he muttered

“Shame, Mr. Weasley. You should show proper respect for Ministry officials” Delores Umbridge said “But I have no time for you now. Good to see you, as always Amelia” She forced her way into the room followed by four Aurors and Percy Weasley.

Madam Bones regarded the Senior Undersecretary coldly and asked “What can I do for you Delores?”

“Why, I am here to assist you in finishing the investigation of course. I am quite certain it has put you into a most difficult position.” Umbridge said sweetly.

Eyes narrowing, Amelia asked “And what position might that be? My investigation is proceeding quite smoothly. And will be concluded in due time.”

“You see, that’s exactly why I’m here, dear!” Umbridge exclaimed in a high pitched voice “I had assumed that’s why your niece was here! The Minister and I have been reviewing the witness statements as quickly as they come in! Have you, by chance, tested her wand yet?”

Caught off guard, Amelia replied “Why no—”

“Percival, if you would, please” Umbridge ordered

Ron grabbed his brother’s arm and snarled “How could you take orders from toad-face?”

“I am a Ministry Official following the instructions of my superior” Percy said haughtily “Don’t make me ask the Aurors to arrest you.”

Ron drew back a fist, which Hermione grabbed “Stop Ron!” she said through gritted teeth. Ron used his other hand, but it was only a futile shove.

“You are Susan Bones?” asked Percy, pointedly ignoring Madam Bones. Susan nodded. “I have an order signed by the Minister of Magic himself to confiscate your wand for testing.” He said.

Amelia trembled, partly with anger and partly with fear “Be very careful, Weasley. You could be making a career decision.”

“I-it i-is per-perfectly legal, Director Bones” Percy said nervously “P-please, see f-for yourself”

Seizing the offered document, she scanned it “Such an order requires my signature” she said “Susan, you keep hold of your wand”

“Yes ma’am” an uneasy Susan replied

Offering one of her trademark coughs, Umbridge said “Hem-hem I do beg your pardon, my dear Amelia. But it doesn’t do well to have a well respected member of the government, such as yourself be involved in a possible conflict of interest. That is why Minister Fudge has decided to intervene and take personal control of this case.”

“Covered all your tracks, have you?” Amelia spat out angrily.

Both Tonks and Moody stood beside their boss “Orders, Director?” Mad-Eye asked.

“Thank you both” replied Amelia, defeated “Go on Susan”

“Pari Incantatum” Percy cast with the girl’s wand. The afterglow of the Killing Curse was obvious. Percy quickly cancelled the spell and said “Your suspicions were quite correct, Madam Senior Undersecretary.”

“No one appeared!” Amelia pointed out “Weasley didn’t allow sufficient time!”

Umbridge gave a sad smile and said “I am most sorry Amelia. But, the law is quite clear and we have witnesses who saw the curse used. Percival, I am very pleased with your conduct, but I believe I should handle this personally.”

“Thank you” said Percy, glowing with pride.

“Hold out your hands, child” she said to Susan. “Don’t make this any more difficult than it has to be”

Susan’s eyes went wide with hate and fear “Don’t you touch me!” she yelled.

“Susan Amelia Bones--” Umbridge began. She stressed the middle name and her eyes flicked towards Madam Bones “You are under arrest for suspicion of two counts of murder and two counts of attempted murder. Incarcerous!”

Ropes tightly bound Susan’s wrists and, though rather loosely to permit limited movement, Susan’s ankles. “Auntie” she whimpered

“Susan! Remember what I told you!” Amelia said firmly “You did nothing wrong. Meanwhile, not a word. Understood?”

Susan sniffed and said “Yes ma’am”

“Move!” Umbridge demanded. She grabbed Susan’s arm and shoved her at the waiting Aurors.

Amelia’s wand was pressed under her opponent’s chin “Don’t even think of pushing her again!”

“Aurors! Assistance!” Umbridge squeaked. Three of her Aurors trained their wands on Amelia as did Percy.

Ron pulled his and pointed it at his brother. And Tonks and Moody directed theirs at the other Aurors.

Amelia pulled back and said “Everyone stand down! That is a direct order!” more calmly she added “Anyone who doesn’t obey will be fined a month’s pay” that produced results “Better...now...For the moment, I will allow my niece to be taken in--”

“And you... will... be next” Umbridge interrupted shakily “You dared to threaten--”

“Oh! Shut up!” Amelia said, malevolently “Now, Susan, you remember...No matter what you’re asked--“

Susan nodded and said “Yes, Auntie. I’m waiting for my parents.”

“And if the slightest harm comes to her I’ll personally see to it that you’re all fired!”

No Auror touched Susan, but they escorted her away.

“You, I’m going after no matter what!” Amelia declared, glaring at Umbridge.

Her sweet exterior completely restored, Umbridge replied “Now, now there should be a certain level of courtesy between us. We may occasionally disagree, but for the good of our world, we must work together. Good day, Amelia. I look forward to our next chat.” She left with Percy following in her wake.

“Bloody hell!” Ron gasped as she walked out.

After several calming breaths, she turned to the Gryffindors “Not hardly good government, was it?” she commented rhetorically.

“What will happen now, Madam Bones?” asked Hermione.

“Delores and I have always been on opposite sides” Amelia said “But she broke the law and deserves to be in Azkaban for what she did. The fact that she tortured my niece...even a little...made it personal. With this stunt, well--“ she felt her temper about to explode so she changed subjects “On another note, I’m somewhat behind in my Hogwarts gossip. How long have Harry and Susan been dating?”

Ron answered “This was their first Hogsmeade trip”

“Was it going well, before...” her question just didn’t finish.

Hermione nodded “They seemed to be having fun”

“That’s good...helluva first date...I find I have a lot to do. Would you inform the Headmaster of the situation and ask Professor Sprout to contact me by floo as soon as possible?” Then, without really waiting for an answer, Madam Bones disappeared.

A Mixed up Month

## FIRST INTERLUDE

Moments after the attack, on the eastern coast near the Channel:

"Are you alright?" Attacker #1 asked.

Ripping off the hood, Attacker #2 replied "Obviously! The Avada, Great Merlin!"

"Vicious!" Attacker #1 agreed "And she nearly bit my thumb off!"

"We have to leave the country for our alibies to hold" Attacker #2 pointed out. "And get that treated"

Attacker #1 nodded "We knew that, beforehand. It's about like we planned"

"You don't think we overdid it?" Attacker #2 asked.

"What's done is done" Attacker #1 said, harshly. With that, they both disappeared to their seperate destinations.

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## SECOND INTERLUDE

Two hours after the attack, in the village of Little Hangleton:

"Potter was attacked, possibly killed, Master" a quivering wizard reported.

"FOOL!" Lord Voldemort shouted "How dare you use my mark, without certainty!? CRUCIO!!"

"MERCY!! PLEASE MY LORD!!" he begged

After several minutes of screams, the Dark Lord finally relented "Now! I am already aware that Potter survived!"

"But Master, I could see the Killing Curse!" the minion pointed out.

Almost kindly, Voldemort said "Peter, Peter thinking isn't something you're very good at. Don't do something unless I tell you to. Are we clear?"

"Y-yes M-m-my Lo-ord" Wormtail stammered.

"Now I have a new mission for you. I want you to find who attacked the boy today." Voldemort ordered "Do not approach him in any way. Just find out who. Do not attack him, I doubt you would win anyway. Simply report his identity to me. Can you handle that?"

Wormtail bowed low and said "Anything you command"

"Are you still here?" Voldemort asked disdainfully "Begone!"

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### THIRD INTERLUDE

The Office of the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic, after having read Auror Reports and Witness Statements:

"Fools! Idiots!! Imbeciles!! Can't do anything right!!" Delores screeched. Then, tapping her wand against her nose thoughtfully she said "How can I make the most of this? Hmm?"..."Ahhh"

She scratched furiously on parchment consuming several pages until she got exactly what she wanted, then sought out the Minister.

"Are you sure of this, Delores?" he asked "Seems rather harsh, especially given Amelia's position"

Nodding, she replied "Minister Fudge, you have hit the point precisely. It is exactly why we must do this. You must not be seen favoring the relatives of members of the government, regardless of their standing."



"Well, I see your point" he conceded "Very well, do as you see best"

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## During Harry's Coma

Under the care of Healer Bole of the Hogmeade Branch of St. Mungo's, Harry recovered from the brutal assault. Harry slept through the regrowth of his bones. Madam Pomfrey, who rightly said she could regrow a hand overnight, would tell anyone that such a complex job of regrowing bones for both arms and both legs while dealing with numerous other injuries was a full-time job of not less than a week.

Several members of the Order of the Phoenix quietly watched Harry's room. Sometimes inside, sometimes outside. On the second full day of Harry's hospitalization, Headmaster Dumbledore came to visit Harry briefly. Trotting along beside him was a large black dog. When the Headmaster left, the dog remained. Its presence was initially disturbing, but the staff found the dog likable, except for its annoying habit of sticking its nose up medi-witch's skirts.

Madam Bones found herself in a difficult position, politically. The Wizengamot was averse to direct clashes with the Minister of Magic. She had to call in a few favors to get her niece released into her parents' custody. But, Susan was barred from school.

With the Wizengamot distracted by what he called The Bones Affair, the Minister of Magic announced the first of a series of reforms. It was an Educational Decree appointing Delores Umbridge as the first ever Hogwarts High Inquisitor. During the press conference, Cornelius Fudge stated “For too long, has the education of our children has not been controlled by the people. Today, your government claims a voice for you. The High Inquisitor will have broad discretionary powers and certain co-equal rights and responsibilities with the Headmaster.”

“What the bloody hell does that mean?” Ron was heard to ask. Though his only audience was Hermione, the reader of the article, a

dog called Snuffles and an unconscious Harry. The dog made a threatening growl that came from deep in its throat.

The next page of the article was a quote from the former professor “As my first act” Delores announced “Which I regret must be taken even before I officially report, is a staffing matter. Since the Headmaster has been unable to obtain a replacement for the Defense Against the Dark Arts professorship, I shall personally resume the post in addition to the great responsibilities already entrusted to me” She beamed proudly at the assembled reporters.

Two days later “--In conclusion, I am fully capable of handle all aspects of the day to day running of Hogwarts. Further, and with the majority of the Board of Governors, I officially reject Madam Umbridge assuming the post” said Dumbledore during several hours of testimony before a session of the Wizengamot.

This, while deeply embarrassing to Madam Umbridge and Minister Fudge, didn't boost Madam Bones' weakened position. She argued for a complete veto of the Decree. The next day, the legislature/supreme court of the Wizarding World suggested that an alternate be found that would be acceptable to the three parties. Compromise usually means that no one is exactly satisfied.

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“That insufferable git!!” was only the beginning of Ron’s tirade. It ended with “How could anyone think he was a good idea?!”

“Quitcher bellyaching” Harry groaned

“Shaddup, Harry” said Ron. Then he spun in his chair “Harry, you’re awake?”

Harry moaned more loudly “You could wake the dead, mate.” he complained.

“YES!!” Ron celebrated.

Harry heard an “Arf Arf Arf Arf Arf”

“Got nuthin better to do, lazy mutt” he joked. Harry laughed when he felt the mattress get whacked.

Tonight had been Remus’ watch since, as Sirius put it, he’d been slacking for the last three days “What’s going on?” he asked as he rushed in.

“Not so loud, please” Harry groaned “My head hurts and my stomach feels Bllllaaaacccchhhhh” He wretched several times.

Ron, with a disgusted look, said “Thanks, mate”

“Oh hush, Ron” Hermione said “Scrougify. There, all better”

Drawn by the commotion, Healer Bole came in “Good to see you awake, Mr. Potter. Now, just a quick exam.” He ushered the visitors out and drew a privacy screen.

They heard grunts and groans along with an occasional “ouch!”

“Now, someone tell me what happened” said Harry, he was long used to the wake-up routine.

Everyone started talking at once “Actually, I would prefer that Mr. Potter tell us as much as he remembers!” the healer said forcefully.

“I remember breakfast” Harry began “Then, the walk to Hogsmeade...Had another argument with my ex-girlfriend, stupid sl--er, sorry Ron”

Ron shook his head and said “Forget it”

“Sue....Susan Bones, that is. By the way, where is she?” he tried to get up.

Healer Bole pushed him down “We’ll worry about that later” he said “Finish the story. I want to make sure of your memory”

"Alright" Harry agreed "Let's see...ummm...we went to...ahh. I can't remember! Ohh...sod it all!!" He punched the bed in frustration "Wait! I remember Neville and Luna...and we kissed"

Ron's eyes popped out "Merlin Harry!" he exclaimed "Musta been some date!!"

"Quiet Ron" said Remus. He swatted Ron's arm while choking back a laugh of his own.

Harry's eyes wandered "I remember feeling cold" he said "DEMENTORS!!"

"Easy Harry" Hermione said soothingly. Harry was still so weak she had no problem holding him to the bed.

"We were attacked. I remember that, now." he said "You two alright."

They both nodded "Not a scratch" Hermione confirmed.

"Good, and Sue?" he asked.

"We treated Miss Bones for a cracked skull and some scratches and bruises" Healer Bole replied.

"I'd like to see her, please" Harry requested. When everyone's eyes started to drift, he knew something was wrong. His voice hardened "NOW!"

"What it is, is--" Hermione began.

Harry cut her off bluntly "Don't give me that!"

"Alright, Harry" Remus said "If you promise to lay there quietly, we'll tell you everything that's been going on. Okay?" Harry gave a curt nod. It took more than an hour to tell the story

"All my fault" Harry said gloomily, after they finished. Sniffles gave an impatient growl, but it was Harry's first guilt trip in a long time.

“Harry, this one isn’t about you. Well not directly anyway.” Remus explained “I very much doubt Madam Bones ever intended for Susan to repeat some of the things she said that day. Though I admit I’d’ve loved to’ve seen her expression” He fought with a giggle fit.

Ron lost his battle “It was classic. She looked like she was gonna pop!” he laughed “Imagine! Pieces of that sickening pink outfit splattered all over the room!! HHAHAHAHA!!”

“I read up on both Madam Bones and --ahhh-- Oh, what the he-heck-- Toadface--” Hermione said, drawing shocked looks “They had an acrimonious relationship back when they attended Hogwarts and its continued into their political careers”

Ron clapped “Way to go Hermione!! Just one question--what does agrmiinis mean?”

“Ac-ri-mon-ious, Ron” said Remus in teacher mode “It means they were as much friends as Harry and Draco are.”

“Ok, I get it” Harry said, finally “Now, why was Sue arrested?”

“Did you realize that not all your attackers were Dementors, Harry?” Remus asked.

Harry nodded “Figured that when my Patronus didn’t do anything to the other two. What were they?”

“Wizards” answered Ron “We never saw their faces and Fudge took over the investigation, but all he’s done since, is arrest Susan.”

“Professor Dumbledore was quite angry with you when he learned you hadn’t told him you could destroy Dementors” said Hermione.

“Couldn’t care less” Harry snapped “Is there any way I can help Susan?” Everyone shrugged. “How about talk to her?” he asked, irritably.

“Its rather early, Harry” Remus said “Give it a few hours”

Harry noticed the early dawn light "What day is it?" he asked

"Saturday, its been two weeks" Ron answered "McGonagall gave us a portkey to come over anytime"

"As long as it didn't interfere with class?" Harry didn't exactly ask.

"And your grades are getting better, Ron" Hermione commented

Harry quipped "Putting my pain to good use?"

They didn't exactly find it funny. But there were faint smiles. Ron and Hermione caught Harry up on the general goings on at Hogwarts. The adults drifted away even, a medi-witch noted, Harry's loyal dog, that trotted out with Remus.

The same witch came back a half hour later saying "Mr. Potter, you have a floo-call. I can levitate you over"

"Please"

"Hiya, Harry" Susan greeted him warmly. "Long time no see, been awake long"

Smiling at her, he replied "Nice to see you too. Just a couple of hours. It was too early before. Ron and Hermione caught me up on things."

"Oh" Susan replied "I hope they didn't worry you too much"

Harry looked at her curiously and asked "Me? What about you? You got hurt, too--"

"Not as bad as you" she cut in.

Harry ignored that "And what about being you arrested? Remember last year...an Unforgivable earns you a one way trip to Azkaban. That's what the fake Moody said"

"Yeah, but I did what I had to do" she said, calmly. "As for a trial, the only reason that's happening is to hurt Auntie Ami's reputation. My biggest problem right now, really is I've missed two weeks of school."

Harry laughed at that and quipped "You sure you're not Hermione? Anyway...got a question"

"Nothing more about the trial, Harry" she said, a little impatiently "I shouldn't be talking about it over the floo"

Harry found himself blushing, he said "Actually no, nothing to do with that. Its just...well maybe it's a little selfish of me to ask...But Ron said you called yourself my girlfriend when they first brought me in."

"I did" she admitted "Though, at the time, it was mostly so I could get in to see you. I mean I knew you'd be in for a while. You're not mad, are you?"

"No, just surprised" he replied "I mean you went from not letting me kiss you to being my girlfriend in a few hours. These rules are confusing." There was amusement in his tone.

Susan gave him a coy look and said "I'd probably say yes if you asked"

"Don't wanna do that over the floo either" Harry replied "More fun in person" Harry's eyes suddenly drooped and he yawned deeply. He fell asleep. Susan wasn't offended, of course, she just called out for a medi-witch.

That afternoon, responding to a knock on the hospital room door, Hermione opened it and said "Hello, Harry's sleeping right now, Percy."

"I will excuse the informality for now, Miss Granger." The older Weasley replied "However, I expect to be addressed properly going forward."

Ron blocked his brother from entering the room "What would that be?" he sneered "Percy the perfect prick"

“Ron, language!” Hermione scolded him.

Ron ignored her and asked “What do you want, Weatherby?”

If he was offended by the taunt, Percy gave no sign “The Ministry has questions regarding its investigation” Percy replied “They are for Potter and do not concern you. I personally regret you did not take my advice regarding the boy hero. However I will not hold that against you in class. But, I shall not hesitate to discipline you just because we are related, is that clear?”

Ron balled up his fists “I got half a mind to--“

“I mean it, Ronald” said Percy, cutting him off “You will address me as Professor Weasley, or Sir, in class. You have been warned. Now, it is my understanding that Potter has recovered. It is past time for him to answer questions regarding the Hogsmeade incident.” He pushed past his brother and briskly walked to Harry’s bed.

Hermione got between Percy and Harry’s bed “I told you he was sleeping!” she whispered sharply “Either leave or we’ll call security.”

“Out of my way, girl.” said Percy, then he kicked the bed. “Up Potter!” he demanded.

Harry groggily rolled over and mumbled “Sh-up Ron”

“Lumos Maxima” Percy cast and a powerful light burst from his wand. He kicked the bed again. “Now, Potter! Stop wasting my time!!”

Harry reflexively squinted against the bright light and threw his arm across his face. This time, though, it fully woke him “WHAT!?” he shouted.

“Did you witness Susan Bones using the Killing Curse?” asked Percy immediately jumping into his first question.

Harry glared at him “Hermione told me that Fudge stopped investigating who attacked us. Is that true?” he snapped back.



"It is" Percy replied "Now, answer my question"

"Why?" asked Harry.

Percy stiffened "It is not your place to question MINISTER Fudge's decisions" he said coldly "Now, there is an open investigation regarding use of the Killing Curse. I have a number of questions which you will answer. First, again, did you with--"

"Hermione" Harry said, cutting off Percy, "isn't there a law that entitles anyone to counsel when being questioned?"

Hermione nodded, somewhat surprised and replied "Yes, its rather similar to Mug--"

"That only applies to the suspect" said Percy "Now, for the last time, did you--"

Again Harry interrupted "Shut up, Percy! I won't answer any questions without someone to give me legal advice."

"Arrogant boy. The Minister wants this case resolved. You do realize you could be jailed for contempt for not answering me." Percy answered.

Harry snarled at him "If I weren't in this bed, I'd hex you but good"

"What is all this noise?!" an irritated medi-witch demanded. She had her wand out.

Percy drew himself up importantly and said "I am attempting to question this person regarding the incident two weeks ago. Ministry business!"

"This is a hospital!" she replied "That is a patient! You are disturbing him! You may leave willingly, or you might become a patient yourself!"

"This incident will be reported, Madam" Percy said to the medi-witch. Then, he said to Harry "Fifty points from Gryffindor for refusing to answer me" After that, he turned on his heel and departed.

"He can't do that!" Harry exclaimed.

"Actually, Harry, he can" said Hermione "Percy was appointed to be the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor"

Rolling his eyes, he replied "Bloody swell. We'll be back to 'there will be no need for wands' And he acts just like Snape, too."

"My brother's a git. But, I can't believe he'd be that bad." Ron said

"Bet'cha a Galleon" Harry replied with a disgusted snort.

Ron shook his head in denial "Merlin, no! I can't go through that again" he complained "Its like watching grass grow!"

"We'll have to do something" said Hermione, firmly.

Curiosity aroused, Harry asked "What?"

"I dunno, at least not yet" Hermione answered "I'll think about it"

"While you're thinking about that, think about who I should get as an attorney" Harry said "Do you know any magical ones?" His friends exchanged looks then smirked at him "WHAT?!"

"Go ahead, Ronald" Hermione offered

"Can't think of anyone?" Ron asked. Harry shook his head, only increasing his friends' amusement. "It'd really piss off Fudge." Ron snickered

Harry complained "Come on, Ron, I've got a headache"

"Amelia Bones is an attorney, you goof!" he laughed.

A few minutes later they were in front of the fireplace “Ministry of Magic! Amelia Bones’ office!” Harry called into it.

“I heard you were awake, Harry. How are you?” she greeted.

“Fine, Madam Bones” he replied “I need help and I was hoping you would be able to...Ummm, Percy Weasley was here trying to question me about what happened.”

“And what did you tell him?” she asked, concerned.

“Nothing” Harry answered “I told him I wanted an attorney present. He also took fifty House points. Is it true that he’s the new Defense teacher?”

Nodding, Amelia replied “Yes, it is. And I don’t see him as any better than Delores, either. Harry, I’d say we have a mutual problem. Unless you object, consider me your attorney. And, if anyone else tries to question you, tell them to contact me.”

“That was easier than I thought” said Harry with a laugh “That’s just what I was going to ask”

“Excellent, then! Well, I find myself with a fair amount of work to do. Can you be up first thing in the morning?” she said. At Harry’s nod, she added “I’ll be at the hospital tomorrow--”

The connection started to fade, but Harry stopped her “Wait! One more thing!” he said “Could I...that is...is there any way I could see Susan?”

“That might be hard. But, I’ll do my best.” Madam Bones replied

Harry’s mood was much better after that. He, Hermione and Ron talked for a while longer. When dinner arrived, they left, feeling hungry themselves. They went back to Hogwarts. Harry ate about half of the meal and was pushing the food around when Remus returned with Sirius in his animagus form.

“You really should try to eat it all, Harry” he urged.

Harry looked up, slightly annoyed “I’m not all that hungry, Professor. Besides, its the first thing I’ve eaten in two weeks. Hungry, Snuffles?” He dropped the tray on the floor.

The dog eagerly went to work, its tail gently hitting Harry’s legs.

“Harry, you don’t need to call me professor, anymore. I’m not one, you know.” Remus said.

Harry smirked and nudged the dog with his foot “Yeah, someone mentioned it makes you feel old”

“Oh?” Remus said, looking down at his disguised friend “Harry, did you know St. Mungo’s offers free neutering for cats and dogs?”

“Rrrrrrrrrr” Snuffles rumbled, showing his teeth.

“That’s without anesthetic, of course” Remus said mercilessly. “Yipe!!” he yelped when the dog nipped his ankle.

Harry almost fell off the bed, laughing “What then?” he asked

“Remus is fine, an occasional Moony would be good” the werewolf said. “We figured you’d enjoy some time with your friends, how did your day go?”

Harry gave a half shrug “Mostly good” he said “Had a guest I wish Snuffles had been here for” He quickly told them about Percy Weasley’s visit and the conversation with Madam Bones.

“You have a true gift, Harry” said Remus in an amused voice. “People either love you or hate you” His comment was accompanied by dog laughter.

“Not funny, Professor Lupin” Harry grumbled.

Remus held up a hand in surrender “Ok, Harry” he said “However, since you insist on calling me professor we’ll talk about some of the

things you've missed. Nothing too hard. These are all the potions you missed." Snuffles whined and covered his ears with his paws.

The next morning, someone Snuffles had never seen entered the room. Plus another unfamiliar smell was also just outside. He emitted a low growl, not wanting to wake Harry.

A growling dog didn't scare Susan, besides she knew this one had been with Harry the entire time he'd been in the hospital "Easy, boy" she whispered "I'm friendly ... Harry's sleeping huh? ... Well, I'm just gonna wake him up... Don't worry I have a nicer way than Percy did" She patted the dog's head.

Sirius decided this must be Susan Bones. He looked her over briefly, and appreciatively.

"Glad you approve" she said, before turning to Harry "Wake up, Harry"

"Woof!" Snuffles barked, as if to say "that's no way to wake him"

Susan stroked his cheek with a single finger, then kissed him gently on the lips. "Mmm...up yet?" she asked

"Could get used to this" Harry mumbled against her lips. His free hand came up to rest on her neck.

They were quite enjoying themselves when a stern voice said "I assume Harry is awake now"

"Yes, Auntie" said Susan in a rush "Sorry"

"Sorry" Harry parroted.

"Hmph! No you aren't" Amelia Bones scoffed "But, business before pleasure. First, Susan has to appear before the Wizengamot on Thursday, so that'll finally be over with. Harry, I'm quite pleased with the way you dealt with Percy. I'm not sure I could've stopped myself from doing something highly embarrassing to him."

Harry blushed and replied "Thank you, Madam Bones"

"If you'll sign this document, it will acknowledge my appointment as your attorney." She said, handing him the paper. Harry signed it and handed it back. "Replicatus, Replicatus," She handed a copy back to Harry and said "One for Ministry files. One for me. All nice and legal. Now if anyone tries to question you again, show them that. It should raise some eyebrows"

Harry folded it and tucked it into his robes "Thanks, I really appreciate this ... Ummm... about what happened ... Sue, I'm really sorry you got hurt."

"I'm perfectly fine, Harry. Not even a scar left" she replied "And it wasn't your fault"

Harry began to argue "But, Death Eaters--"

"What little investigating was done gave us a number of possible suspects, Harry" Amelia replied "And they don't necessarily have anything to do with you."

"But, I saw the Mark in the sky" he pointed out

Nodding, she replied "I know and while Voldemort or one of his followers are likely suspects, there are a fair number of other possibilities. Delores, herself, for one."

"That would still be--" Harry began

Amelia stopped him "NO, it wouldn't. Someday I'll tell you about her grudge against me. To her mind, she has plenty of reason to want to target Susan just because she's my niece. I am quite convinced that your friend Ronald Weasley was not involved, but except for the lack of ability to control a Dementor, the list of suspects includes Vincent Crabbe, Seamus Finnegan, Gregory Goyle, Draco Malfoy and Ginevra Weasley. They have demonstrated their feelings for both of you repeatedly, however the investigation was ended before they could be questioned."

“Well, I don’t think Fred or George would have” Harry put in.

Susan patted his hand “Don’t worry Harry, I already said that”

“And I can personally confirm that Arthur wasn’t involved” Amelia said  
“He works for me, if you remember and I saw him several times that morning”

With a weak smile Harry said “I’m glad. I’d really hate to have to put Ron through that.”

“Justin’s also on the list, Harry” Susan added “So maybe its all my fault.”

“That’s just plain stupid” Harry growled “Justin’s got a girlfriend and Ginny cheated on me. Why should they even care what we do?!”

Madam Bones briefly thought about her role in starting the budding relationship. She’d been very surprised to get that letter from her old friend, the Head of Hufflepuff. She had been a little too clever for her own good. The truth was, she was nudging what she thought was her painfully shy, and rather bitter, niece toward the youngest Weasley boy. Susan’s previous letters seemed to indicate an interest in him. That conversation flashed through her mind.

“Ami, I don’t know where you got the idea that she was at all bitter” her friend had berated her “Angry? Certainly! The boy swallowed all that stupid drivel Skeeter put in the paper!”

In response, Madam Bones had complained “But not dating at all! Not good for a girl her age, PomPom”

“I’m quite certain your brother-in-law doesn’t mind” Professor Sprout shot back at her friend “Sue’s grades shot up nicely as a result.”

“If it weren’t for her mother, Neil Bones would have that girl hidden in her room til she turned thirty and walked down the aisle” Amelia scoffed.

“Gross exaggeration” Pomona countered, slightly amused “and you know it. Now, what’s got you all cranky?”

“Not cranky, just confused, PomPom” she replied “I had two ideas in mind when I spoke to Harry last month. I did want the eye-witness version out there since Fudge has blinders on the whole world.” Amelia paused but her friend just sat there “I wasn’t match-making” she continued “At least not directly. I was fully aware of the relationship between Harry and Arthur’s daughter. I had thought the youngest Weasley boy would make a nice match. His hair is almost identical to Edgar’s”

Pomona burst out laughing in an undignified manner that students would never see “So! That’s it!” she whooped gleefully “You’re bothered because you miss-fired!!”

Amelia decided that, one day she would tell her niece. Certainly not today. But, short of marriage, Harry need not know. “I must admit” she said to the teenagers “I didn’t exactly expect you to become such good friends.”

“Funny thing about that, Auntie” Susan replied “In a way, we owe it all to Ginny Weasley”

“How’s that?” Amelia asked.

Susan popped herself on the forehead “You don’t read the letters to the editor, do you?” she asked.

“Of course not, complete waste of time” Amelia replied. Harry, too, looked a little confused by Susan’s comment.

“Come on!” she huffed “Think about it Harry! I couldn’t so much as look at you or you at me without her objecting.”

Harry grimaced, shaking his head “Yeah, and that letter about you. Y’know, more and more , she really is reminding me of Malfoy.” He abruptly broke into laughter, drawing curious looks “Ha Ha....hmmmm.... sorry I just had this image pop into my head of her calling herself The Weaslette. It’s too funny!”



"I never liked it when I saw bullies picking on their fellow students" said Amelia with a frown "And I see that Lucius has passed the worst of his qualities onto his son. Did you ever report him?"

Harry shrugged and replied "Never seemed all that important. It's not like Malfoy wins much. Last year we stunned him, Crabbe and Goyle and played Exploding Snap on their backs."

"I (snort) didn't hear (giggle) that, you get me." She said, amusedly.

Harry nodded and replied "Yes, Madam Bones."

"Right, then" she said "Harry, I need you to tell me everything that happened that day"

Harry didn't much like the charmed quill and notebook that appeared and said so.

"This isn't a Quick Quotes Quill, Harry" said Madam Bones "This is a Ministry certified legal Dictation Quill. It will write exactly what you say, no more, no less"

"Alright, then" he said as he began his story. Harry stumbled over mentioning the kiss in Madam Rosmerta's Inn. Despite her friendliness, she was still an imposing figure.

"I think Harry'll need an anti-blush potion" Susan teased.

Harry made a grumpy noise and poked her in the side. Susan squealed at the attack "That'll teach ya....Pick on a wounded man like that" he said, rather pleased with himself.

"Rumor has it" Susan said calmly. Then she trapped Harry's arm over his head "That you're ticklish under your arm!"

The thin material of the hospital gown offered no protection at all "NO FAIR!" he complained as he squirmed and laughed.

A “HEM! HEM!” stopped the play fight. “I figured that would work” Madam Bones said “Delores began using that the day she became a Prefect.”

“Sor-ry!” Harry said, trying to suppress his laughter.

“Like I said, business before pleasure” Madam Bones commented “Finish the story, please Harry”

Harry nodded and said “Yes ma’am, we were taken into that alley and that’s when it started.”

“Can you remember anything about them? Any identifying marks?” asked Madam Bones.

Harry shook his head “Uh-uh. They had masks and hoods.”

“That’s alright, Harry” she said “Now, what about Susan’s actions? What do you remember her doing?”

“They were punching and kicking me” said Harry, as his memory cleared “I can remember her not moving....Ohh, that’s why I had a broken jaw” he realized

“What does that have to--“ Susan started, wondering what that had to do with what she was doing.

Madam Bones cut her off sharply “Hush Suzy-Q! Harry, what about your jaw?”

“The doct...uhh... healer told me about my jaw being broken but I couldn’t remember when” he answered “It was after he kneed me, I bit him in the knee. You think it’ll help?”

She shrugged and said “I’m not sure. Can you finish up?”

“Sure” he replied “I can’t tell how long it was. But, then I saw Sue wake up. She managed to get her wand. I didn’t hear what she cast, but it was green. After that, all I can remember is that the beating stopped. Then I woke up here, with Ron and Hermione.”

Madam Bones packed up her Dictation Quill and said "Outside of a courtroom, don't answer any questions. If anyone does approach you, you show them that document I gave you and contact me straight away. Clear?"

"Yes ma'am" Harry replied, nodding.

Madam Bones turned to Susan and asked "How much time do you have?"

"Less than an hour, Auntie Ami" Susan said after she looked down at her ankle.

Harry looked over the edge and saw a manacle on her right ankle. A clock on it was counting down, currently reading fifty-one minutes and eighteen seconds... seventeen seconds... sixteen seconds.... "So, what's that?" he asked.

"Auntie managed to get me a two hour release from house arrest" Susan explained "This is an automatic portkey, magic suppressor and locator."

"Does it...hurt?" Harry asked.

Susan shrugged "Not exactly" she replied "It's not comfortable, though. I can't feel my magic, it's...creepy" she shivered slightly

"I'm sorry, Sue" he said.

Amelia cut off whatever Susan was going to say "Harry, listen to me. First, Susan committed no crime. Use of deadly force is allowed when there is no other option. I should also point out that since there are no bodies, there is no evidence that anyone was even killed. Finally, I would think you have enough burdens without blaming yourself for everything everyone else does. Don't you agree?"

"But, I--" he began

Interrupting him, she said "I'm not accustomed to being argued with. I only want to hear 'Yes Madam Bones' and 'Goodbye Madam Bones'"

Harry obeyed, generating an amused giggle from Susan. Then, rather disappointed, he said "I guess you're leaving, too"

"Me?" asked Susan "I still got forty eight minutes"

Amelia patted her niece's shoulder and kissed the top of her head "Just remember, it is best if you activate it manually a little early" she said "Makes for a good impression. Have a nice visit."

"Just like that?" asked Harry as she departed "She left us alone together?"

Susan planted her elbows on the bed and leaned her chin on her hands "Oh, sure, Harry" she said sarcastically "Really romantic spot"

"It's a bed, it's made for snogging" Harry countered. He twisted on his side and stroked her forearm.

"Ohhh , awright" Susan sighed dramatically. She leaned forward and pecked the side of his mouth. "That sounded like a laugh. Did your dog just laugh?" she asked.

Harry grimaced at her and frowned down at Snuffles "Uh yeah" he replied "I think he knows I'm being teased" He took off his hospital bootie and threw it at the dog. "Take a walk" Harry ordered

Snuffles caught the bootie, jumped off the bed and trotted around to Susan. He laid his head in her lap.

"Ooohh, ain't he clever" she cooed, scratching the dog's head and behind his ears.

"Getting in the bloody way is what he's doing" Harry grumbled "Maybe Lupin had a good idea, after all. Wha'd'ya think Snuffles?"

Snuffles, still with his head in Susan's lap, covered his head with his paws and whimpered.

“He’s crying! What’s that mean boy saying to you?” she rubbed the dog’s head and swatted Harry’s arm.

Harry gave an indignant snort and commented “Showing off is what he’s doing.”

Snuffles looked up and stuck his tongue out at Harry, then did another barking laugh. Finally he curled up at Susan’s feet.

“That’s an interesting dog you got there, Harry” said a giggling Susan

Harry nodded and said “Yeah, he’s a bit of a pest. But he’s one of a kind”

“Reminds me of someone I know” Susan quipped as she tilted her head invitingly.

Harry didn’t bother replying, he simply took the invitation and pressed his lips into hers. The kiss became a tongue wrestling match. In the slightly awkward position, Harry could only rub one hand from her cheek to her shoulder and down her arm.

“Hmm...we’ll have to check that out” Susan giggled when her hand found a sensitive spot on Harry’s side.

“So-not-fair” Harry grunted “Can’t-get-you—hehe—back”

Susan found this quite amusing “This is fun” she commented, sounding casual.

“I will--get even” Harry threatened her.

Ron walked in just then “I don’t think it’s a good time, Hermione” he said.

Hermione, naturally, walked right past him “Hello, Harry” she said, then “Ahh...oops...I see. Hello Susan”

“Having fun?” asked Ron with a smirk.

Harry laughed as Susan's fingers brushed his side again "NO! She's torturing me!"

"What do you think, Snuffles?" Hermione asked.

The dog shook his head.

"What I thought" she continued "Sorry, Harry you're on your own"

Susan turned around and said "No, it's alright, I've probably only got -  
- WHAT?! SEVEN MINUTES?!-- We've been kissing for forty minutes!"

"Think that counts as snogging" Ron commented "Didn't even know the hospital was on the tour. Way to go, mate" He gave Harry a slap on the shoulder.

Susan gave Ron a disgruntled look and said "I was there too, y'know." Harry and Hermione chuckled in amusement.

"We brought something for you" said Hermione as she opened her bookbag.

Harry complained "Not another book. Miss Pince is gonna start coming here to work soon"

"No, Harry" she replied, ignoring the complaint "We thought you might like your picture album."

Harry grinned at her and took the album. Hagrid had given it to him, starting it with pictures of his parents' wedding and a few of shots of the couple with baby Harry. "Thanks guys" he said, resting the treasured book in his lap.

"Could I see?" asked Susan. She noticed him hesitate. "I'll be careful, I promise"

Harry blushed vividly "Its not that --I mean they are the only pictures I have of my parents" he said "It's just -- I haven't had time to -- err-- get rid of some"

"I don't think anything in there would--" she began. Then after thinking "--Oh, I see. Harry you were with her all last year. Of course you have pictures. I'd be surprised if you didn't"

That was when the portkey on Susan's ankle started beeping "How does it work?" asked Hermione, fascinated with a new magical gadget.

"Go on, Sue." Harry said, kissing the back of her hand.

Susan turned pink at the gesture "Ain't you romantic" she teased. "So long Ron, bye Hermione" she said. And with a brief kiss for Harry, she activated the portkey and vanished.

"Hey!" an indignant Hermione complained

Harry laughed at her "She's under house arrest until the trial" he explained "Madam Bones managed to get her a couple of hours. She wore that thing that tracks her and suppresses her magic just to see me."

"And she snogs good, too. Right, mate?" Ron commented.

Harry nodded speechlessly and the three of them shared a good laugh.

## The Ministry vs Susan Bones

Two weeks re-growing bones had left Harry very weak. Healer Bole had insisted that he stay in bed for at least another week. But, Harry had started moving almost at once.

The frustrated healer had finally given in to his stubborn patient and given the teen a few light exercises. He admonished Harry to do them carefully and instructed both the staff and Harry's friends to make sure he doesn't overdo it. That didn't meet with much success. On the afternoon before Susan's trial, Harry announced that he was planning to attend. "Listen to me, Mr. Potter. You have barely managed to walk the length of the ward" he said "Granted, that's far more progress than I expected. But you can't possibly expect to handle a trip to the Ministry. I simply cannot authorize it."

"This is important to me" replied Harry "I'm going. Look, how bad could it be? I'll be sitting in a courtroom."

Bole shook his head "I just cannot sanc--"

"I'm sorry, Healer" said Harry, interrupting him "I can and will leave. Susan is too important to me"

Drawing himself up, Healer Bole informed him coldly that "Patients do not simply walk out of this hospital, and as it is, you barely can."

Harry didn't bother arguing further. "I'm going, you know that, right Snuffles." He told his loyal dog "Moony's outside isn't he?"

"I take it you're pretty determined, Harry" said Remus, when he arrived. Harry nodded, so he continued. "Shouldn't be hard. It'd be really easy if we had your father's Invisibility Cloak"

Harry grinned happily "Check with Ron, got that covered."

"Someone was concerned about you leaving the hospital without an OK" Remus said, eyeing the dog subtly.



Harry shrugged and asked, also looking at Snuffles, "And what would my Dad have done?"

That night, Remus disillusioned himself and slipped into Harry's room. He put a levitation charm on a chair and laid the Invisibility Cloak he'd gotten from Ron on the bed. Finally, he turned Harry's toothbrush into a portkey for The Ministry.

"Good job, Moony" Harry said, when he woke up just after dawn. He got into the floating chair next to his bed and made his way out of the hospital. Avoiding people took a little work, but finally outside, he activated the portkey. Once inside the Ministry, he dressed in his Hogwarts robes and just wandered around, waiting for Susan's hearing time.

"Harry Potter! Harry Potter!" Rita Skeeter exclaimed "Harry! Please! A statement for the public! Why are you here? What about your condition? Can you walk?"

Harry sighed "I'm just tired Rita" he said "All I'm here for is to help my g--err--friend Susan. She was nearly murdered just like I was. This trial is totally unfair. If it wasn't for her, I'd probably be dead."

"Is there any truth to the rumor you two dating?" asked the scandal seeking reporter.

Harry just rolled his eyes and replied "No comment"

"Oh, come on Harry" Rita half-pleaded, half-demanded "The wizarding public has a right to know"

"Actually, everyone is entitled to a private life, Ms. Skeeter" a stony faced Arthur Weasley said.

Rita was thrown off, but recovered in a split second "Why, hello, Arthur. How nice to see you again"

"That's MISTER Weasley" Arthur countered, harshly "Now, Madam Bones has requested Harry's presence in the courtroom. That is, if you don't mind"

An unwilling interviewee never deterred Rita. This one's reaction made her decide to go for the big guns "Well, then, ARTHUR" she said, emphasizing his first name "Please tell us. Both your wife and daughter were extremely vocal concerning our Boy-Who-Lived"

"I hate that term!" snapped Harry. "What went on is none of anyone's business."

Arthur pushed Harry's chair along and into the courtroom "Thank you Harry" he said.

"I don't like giving that woman stories" Harry said in a brittle tone "Besides, Susan said it pretty well."

Arthur gave a frustrated sigh and said "Harry, forgetting about how fathers feel about their daughter's boyfriends. I was quite pleased when you and Ginny began seeing each other. Isn't there a chance you could--"

"No offense, Mr. Weasley" said Harry, cutting him off "But how would you react if you saw your wife snogging someone else?"

Arthur was left with that to ponder because of a young redhead, definitely not his daughter, calling for Harry.

"Mr. Weasley" the girl greeted him stiffly and without her usual smile.

The formality stung "I've know you since you were an infant, Susan" Arthur said "Good luck today. I don't think you did anything wrong. Maybe we can talk later."

"Thank you" replied Susan, more warmly.

Arthur patted her shoulder and said "Well, I'll leave you to it then"

"So long Mr. Weasley" Harry offered a wave. Twisting to Susan, he commented "Well, that was interesting. Wonder where he stands on things."

Susan leaned over and kissed him briefly "Come on, there's some introductions I need to do." She gave a scornful laugh at Harry's nervous expression "My hero!" she chuckled "You-Know-Who, no sweat! A Basilisk, piece of cake! My parents aren't scary!!" She pinched his shoulder.

"Yeah, right" Harry muttered.

"Oh, pish" she scoffed, pushing the chair forward "Mum, Dad...this is Harry. Harry, these are my parents. My Dad, Neil--"

Neil Bones was Harry's height, but his desk job had left him rather pudgy. Not outright fat, such as Uncle Vernon, but he carried a noticeable spare tire "So you're Harry Potter." He said by way of greeting, offering a hand.

"Yes, sir" Harry replied, taking the hand. He could tell where Susan's bright red hair came from.

Sizing Harry up, Mr. Bones commented "Hmm, dunno if he measures up to what I've read about him"

"Daddy!" exclaimed a scandalized Susan.

"Don't mind him" declared Joan Bones "If Merlin himself sought our daughter's hand, he'd find something to complain about." Susan's mother was roughly the same height, and though she had blond hair, she was definitely the source of her daughter's curvaceous figure.

Harry nodded uncomfortably and said "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Bones. It's just...everyone thinks they know me...especially the Daily Prophet...I don't like people writing about me."

"Oh, it isn't the Daily Prophet we've been hearing about you from" she said, eyeing Susan.

Susan blushed and complained "Mother!!"

"Well...err" stuttered Harry. He rubbed the back of his neck, embarrassed by his complaint. "I guess, coming from someone ...

ahh ...like Susan. She actually knows--“ he trailed off, at a loss for words.

Fortunately for Harry, he was saved further foot-in-mouth problems by the Wizengamot entering. Harry didn't see the Wizengamot enter in his previous encounter, and he'd wondered where Amelia Bones was. First, the members entered and remained standing. They were followed by Minister Fudge and Senior Undersecretary Umbridge. Next came Madam Bones, she stood at the Speaker's seat. Finally, to Harry's surprise, came Dumbledore.

“I relieve you, Madam Speaker” said Albus, offering a formal bow.

Amelia bowed back, she handed him her gavel and replied formally “I stand relieved Chief Warlock” She paused in front of Fudge and just barely bowed. Hidden from view, she gave a stony look to her nemesis.

“There's nothing personal in this, you understand, Amelia” Madam Umbridge whispered, displaying one of her sugary smiles to the crowded courtroom.

Crossing the front of the courtroom, Madam Bones nodded and smiled at Harry, and her in-laws. She took her position next to Susan. She briefly clutched the girl's hand, her formal robes hid the gesture from the Wizengamot, but Harry saw it.

“As Chief Warlock, I call this trial and meeting of the Wizengamot, to order” said Dumbledore. Everyone sat. “Is the Ministry prepared to present its case?”

Fudge stood and replied “Yes, Chief Warlock”

“And, is the Defense prepared to present its case?” Dumbledore asked, addressing Madam Bones.

Amelia stood, along with Susan, and replied “We are, Chief Warlock”

“Very well, please proceed, Minister” said Dumbledore.

Minister Fudge nodded "Thank you, Chief Warlock" he began his opening statement "Wizards and Witches of the Wizengamot, I come to you today with a heavy heart. In the years since the fall of You-Know-Who my administration has stood for law and order. One area in which I feel we have done especially well is in the removal from our society of violent individuals. That makes this incident particularly difficult for me. First, in that such occurrences show how much there is still left to do. Further, I feel a deep sense of regret that this case involves one so young. We can, certainly feel compassion for the accused, however we must not allow that compassion to get in the way of our duty to our society. The Unforgivable Curses are called that for a reason, a very good reason. Wizards and Witches of the Wizengamot, the Ministry will show beyond any possibility of doubt that Susan Bones used an Unforgivable. In fact, the most unforgivable of Unforgivables. After which, we will be asking for imposition of the only appropriate penalty. Thank you."

"Madam Bones would you like to make a statement for the defense?" asked Dumbledore.

Nodding, she stood walked to the center "Yes, Chief Warlock. Wizards and Witches of the Wizengamot, my colleagues, certainly we should work to keep order in our society. In fact, each and every one of us swears an oath to do so when we take office. I entirely agree with Minister Fudge in that and in the notion of compassion. If we do not use compassion in our decisions then we run the risk of throwing away centuries of progress. And, more recently, the sacrifices made by those who fought You-Know-Who fifteen years ago. The Potters and the Longbottoms, just to name two families. All evil needs to spread is for good people to do nothing. That's a very wise saying. My client...my niece...defended herself and Harry Potter as best she could in a life or death situation. Under that set of circumstances, who wouldn't use deadly force for self defense?"

"If you're both ready then?" asked the Chief Warlock. Receiving nods from both sides, he continued "Very well, Minister Fudge please begin."

Fudge nodded to Madam Umbridge, who rose “The prosecution calls Rufus Scrimgeour.” After he was sworn in, she continued “Please state your name and occupation for the record.”

“Rufus Scrimgeour, Senior Auror” he replied.

Umbridge nodded and asked “And what, Senior Auror Scrimgeour, were you doing in Hogsmeade on the day in question?”

“Commanding the patrol for the day” he replied.

“I see” Umbridge said “Then it was a normal day for you.”

Scrimgeour shook his head “Well, no, not exactly”

“Ohh!” Umbridge commented in false surprise “Tell me, what made this day unusual?”

“Hogsmeade was visited by students from Hogwarts that day” said Scrimgeour. “We are usually beefed up for such days”

“I see” Umbridge said nodding “And was your force smaller or larger than it usually is?”

“Larger” the Auror replied.

Umbridge looked out at the crowd, and swept the Wizengamot with a look that said she had a major point “Who, Senior Auror Scrimgeour, gave the order assigning the unusual increase?” she asked.

“Director Bones” he replied.

“And did the presence of Harry Potter have anything to do with the increase?” she followed up.

Rufus shook his head and replied “I wasn’t given that information”

“Once again, Senior Auror, who gave the order?” Umbridge repeated

Madam Bones, silent until then, rose and said "Objection, asked and answered"

"Sustained" Dumbledore declared "Move on, Madam Umbridge"

Giving a mocking half bow to her opponent, she said "Your witness, Amelia"

"Why, thank you" Madam Bones said, not quite sneering. She turned to the witness "Good morning, Rufus"

"Hem-hem" Umbridge interrupted.

Bones ignored her "Just a few qu—"

"Hem-hem!" was heard again, this time more loudly

"—questions" Bones continued "How man--"

Slamming her hand down, Umbridge coughed loudly "A-HEM-HEM!! I have an objection, Chief Warlock!" she said angrily "It is inappropriate for the defense to refer to the witness by his familiar name!"

"The objection is agreed to" Dumbledore said patiently "The defense is instructed to address the witness formally" Umbridge grinned happily "The prosecution is instructed to voice its objections in a professional tone of voice or risk being held in contempt"

Bones gave a half shrug and looked at Dumbledore "Of course Chief Warlock. My apologies, if I gave offense. Senior Auror Scrimgeour, what is the everyday patrol complement of Aurors in Hogsmeade?"

"Three to five, Madam Director, depending on the time of day" Rufus answered.

Nodding, she added "I see, and how about on a day when Hogwarts students are visiting?"

"Nine to twelve" he answered.

“And the reason for the variation, Auror Scrimgeour?” she followed up.

“Seasonal” he explained “In general, fewer students make the trip during the winter months”

“And how many Aurors were present on the day Susan Bones was assaulted?” asked Madam Bones.

Umbridge was on her feet “AH-HEM-HEM!” she coughed “I object in the most strenuous terms, Chief Warlock!! Susan Bones is the one facing charges! There is no proof of any assault upon her!!”

“Your objection is overruled, Delores” Dumbledore said, lightly “And I do recommend a coughdrop. I happen to have several flavors in my office. If you like, I will gladly get some during the lunch recess.” Amusement rippled through the courtroom. “Please answer the question, Rufus”

Nodding, Scrimgeour replied “We have reports from thirteen Aurors on that day”

“How many Aurors were on duty, that day?” Amelia asked.

“Twelve” he answered.

“And how do you account for that?” she asked

The Senior Auror replied “One Nymphadora Tonks was in town that day, however she was not on duty”

“Move to strike as irrelevant!” Umbridge demanded.

“Denied” Dumbledore said, instantly.

“One final question, Auror Scrimgeour. How long have you and I known each other?” Amelia asked.

An amused smirk appeared on Scrimgeour's face before he answered “Almost thirty years, Amelia. Though you are a few years older than me.”



"Then no one should be surprised that we are on a first name basis" she observed.

The rest of the day, Aurors were questioned about their incident reports. Interest in the trial fell off the next day as Umbridge questioned multiple witnesses, whose testimony was, with few differences, identical. Most people in the town saw the same thing. Both sides did basically the same thing. Umbridge focused on Susan's use of the Killing Curse, which everyone recognized, while the defense kept pushing the kidnapping portion of the incident.

"The Ministry rests" Umbridge finally said. Murder trials didn't recognize weekends, so that occurred late Sunday morning. The trial broke for lunch.

"The prosecution presented a large number of witnesses" Madam Bones began "And if that was the sole basis for determining a case then even I would start to wonder. It's been a busy couple of days, so I'll try to avoid taxing your patience. I plan on calling only five witnesses. First, I call Percival Weasley as a hostile witness."

Percy came forward and addressed Dumbledore "Chief Warlock, I protest being called to testify by the defense in this matter. I am a Ministry official."

"Your protest has been noted." Dumbledore replied "The witness is ordered to take the stand"

Percy could only obey. After he was seated, Madam Bones asked her first question "Mr. Weasley, how long have you worked for the Ministry?"

"Two years and sixty-one days...Since I graduated from Hogwarts." He answered proudly "I have held a number of increasingly responsible positions"

Nodding, she said "Quite an accurate count there. Tell me, isn't one of the main provisions of Ministry service to maintain a fair and impartial position?"

“Objection, leading the witness!” Umbridge complained.

“Sustained, rephrase the question.” Dumbledore decided.

“Mr. Weasley! Is part of your Ministry oath to enforce laws fairly and equitably? Yes or no!” Madam Bones demanded.

Momentarily stunned, Percy jumped “Yes ma’am!”

“Relevance, Chief Warlock?” asked Umbridge in a bored tone.

Eyeing Amelia, Dumbledore inquired “Madam Bones?”

“Just two questions, Chief Warlock” she replied “Mr. Weasley, are you an Auror?”

Percy shook his head and replied “No, ma’am”

“Then, Mr. Weasley, what qualifies you to perform the Priori Incantatum on a wand for investigative purposes?” asked Madam Bones. When Percy didn’t answer right away, she turned to Dumbledore “Chief Warlock, please instruct the witness to answer the question.”

Dumbledore turned to Percy and said “Answer the question.”

“I ... err ...umm” he stammered uncomfortably. Then he replied, faintly “Senior Undersecretary Umbridge told me to perform the spell.”

Amelia nodded “I remember quite well” she commented “Now is that, or is that not, a violation of procedure?”

“I don’t know” replied Percy.

“Remarkable for someone who prides himself on knowing and following regulations” she didn’t quite sneer.

Umbridge stood and asked “Was the defense asking a question?”

“Additionally, you cut the Priori Incantatum short, didn’t you? You didn’t allow enough time to show if anyone had actually been killed, did you?” Madam Bones asked coldly.

Percy’s face turned pink “Err...err” he stuttered.

“And advance your career again by helping put an innocent child into Azkaban!!” she shouted at him.

“Objection, Chief Warlock!” Umbridge countered.

Before Dumbledore could rule, Madam Bones said disgustedly “I have nothing more for this witness.”

“No questions” said Umbridge

Percy stepped down, shooting an angry look at Susan. He had been publicly humiliated.

Harry, seeing it, grabbed Percy’s wrist. His grip was weak, but the redhead stopped “Don’t even think of pulling something on her” Harry snarled “Or--”

“Don’t threaten me, Potter!” Percy hissed.

“It’s a promise, not a threat” Harry countered.

They were interrupted by a gavel hammering “ORRRRDERRRRRR!!” Dumbledore shouted “Madam Bones, your next witness, please.”

“I call Hermione Granger” she announced.

Hermione’s testimony consisted of a brief account of the morning. Ron pulling her into the sports store, followed by Ron’s growling stomach. They noticed Harry and Susan in Madam Rosmerta’s, so they went to another inn for lunch. Then, noticing the commotion, headed for the Post Office. And then, what she first thought was three Dementors, turning out to be one plus a pair of wizards.

Madam Umbridge objected, saying “Chief Warlock, the investigation into the alleged attack on Potter has been terminated by the Ministry.

“So it just didn’t happen?” asked Hermione in a sarcastic tone.

“Do not question me!” Umbridge snapped.

Hermione shot her a cold look and replied “It looks like a cover-up to me! Why don’t you explain that!”

“You will show me the respect I am due as a Ministry Official!!” Umbridge screeched.

Dumbledore hammered the gavel, but Hermione ignored it “Which is none at all you fat lazy toad!!” she declared.

Harry and Ron burst out in applause. Ron stood and stomped his feet. Harry, still not quite back to full strength, let out an impressive whistle. Though not quite as good as the one Hannah Abbott had in tribute to Susan. Madam Bones, however, had a firm grip on her niece’s arm restraining her from joining in.

“SIIIIILLLEENNNNCE!!” Dumbledore roared, unnaturally loud. Then, “You, Miss Granger, are fined ten Galleons for contempt of court. Madam Bones, have you any further questions?”

Amelia couldn’t keep amusement out of her voice when she replied “No...that will...be...all”

“Does the Ministry wish to cross?” he asked.

Umbridge was shaking with repressed fury “N-no” she said, grinding her teeth.

“The witness is excused” said Dumbledore.

While Bones was calling Ron, Hermione shared a grin with Susan. Then as she passed Harry, who today was sitting next to a very pleased looking young girl, slapped his outstretched hand in celebration. “Best ten Galleons I ever spent!” she commented.

"That was bloody brilliant!!" Ron exclaimed, not too loudly. Not a surprising line from the youngest Weasley male. But, he grabbed her by the shoulders and kissed her. Hard.

"NOW!! MR. WEASLEY!!" came Dumbledore's voice. Hermione watched him go and sat down with a huff.

One of the twins, Hermione couldn't spare the energy to figure which, asked "Something wrong Granger?"

"He did...THAT..." she began in a befuddled tone "Then...just left...All these...people saw, but he--"

"That's both pools gone, dear brother" said Fred.

George nodded "Too true. And in front of plenty of witnesses yet!"

"I'll kill him" Hermione muttered. The twins desperately kept their laughter silent.

Ron was a little difficult for Madam Bones to question. In fact it took almost twice as long to get the same information out of him as it did Hermione. Though, he did snap out of it about half-way through, he never quite lost his grin.

"Quite a display of affection, Mr. Weasley" Umbridge observed.

Ron's smile faded "Don't see how it's any of your business" he replied

"I have to agree with the witness, Chief Warlock" Amelia said as she stood "In spite of the quite public display, it has nothing to do with the case"

Dumbledore nodded "I agree. Madam Umbridge, do you have a question for the witness?"

"You're fairly devoted to Potter, aren't you Mr. Weasley?" she asked.

Ron's eyebrows furrowed in confusion "He's my best friend if that's what you mean"

"You'd do anything for him, wouldn't you?"

Ron nodded "Pretty much, yeah." He said rather proudly.

"Betray your own sister, apparently" she pointed out, smiling sweetly.

"Bitch!" Ron cursed "That's none of your business."

Dumbledore tapped his gavel at the ripple of gasps and giggles that came from the crowd "Now then, let's have quiet" he said mildly "Mr. Weasley, you are warned against the use of foul language."

"Yes Professor" Ron replied, glaring at Umbridge.

"Oh, I'm not offended at all, Chief Warlock" she said in a sugary tone "This is why children go to school. To learn impulse control. And why there are seven years. Tell me Mr. Weasley, have you ever lied for Potter before?"

"Well...but"

Umbridge waved her finger before him and said "Now, now Mr. Weasley. It's really a simple question. And, there's a simple answer. Yes or no."

"Yeah" said Ron sullenly.

Cupping an ear, Umbridge said "Sorry, dear, I didn't quite catch that"

"I am not your DEAR!" Ron snapped.

Patronizingly, she said "Be that as it may. Please, for the record, repeat your answer" Ron did so, angrily. "Temper, temper, Mr. Weasley. Now then, why should the Wizengamot believe an admitted liar?"

"Objection!" Madam Bones exclaimed

Madam Umbridge grinned at her rival and said "I have no more questions for the liar."

"Just keep your blood quills away from me!" Ron snarled as he stalked off. He stormed out of the courtroom ignoring looks from everyone, even Harry and Hermione's concerned ones.

Harry couldn't follow because he was called by Madam Bones. From the stand, he watched as Hermione followed. Amelia asked him to tell about the day from his point of view and let him talk.

"I don't think you need to dwell on the details of the date, Harry" she said, amused at coloring of his cheeks.

Umbridge stood and said "Chief Warlock, I do believe you previously ruled on proper forms of address."

"Oh! Very well!" Amelia said impatiently "Mr. Potter, please resume your testimony at the point where you and Susan...Oh I'm sorry...Miss Bones... were attacked"

"OBJECTION CHIEF WARLOCK!" Umbridge exclaimed "The Ministry has determined that there was no attack on Hogsmeade!!"

"Your objection is overruled" Dumbledore replied "We have heard enough testimony to confirm that both Mr. Potter and Miss Bones were victims of an attack."

"About time you listened to me" Harry commented. Dumbledore ignored it, though. Harry would've happily paid a fine, if it just had gotten the old man to pay attention to him.

Harry completed his version of events then Amelia asked "To confirm, Mr. Potter, did you hear the curse Miss Bones used?"

"No I didn't" Harry replied.

Madam Bones nodded and said "Thank you, Mr. Potter. No further questions."

"Your witness, Madam Umbridge" Dumbledore stated.

Delores approached the stand with a friendly smile "Now, I know we didn't exactly get along as teacher and student, Harry. But I--"

"That's Mr. Potter" he said, cutting her off.

Madam Umbridge stiffened "I beg your pardon!" she exclaimed.

"I'm merely following your example, Madam Umbridge" Harry didn't quite smirk, nor did he exactly look at Madam Bones. He gave every appearance of waiting patiently for her to continue. He found it hard not to laugh, but Susan's aunt had told him that would ruin it completely. He wondered how she could've known Umbridge would've reacted so strongly. The prosecutor repeatedly scratched her chin and her left eye twitched erratically.

Controlling herself with a super-human effort, the Senior Undersecretary finally asked "S-so i-i-its y-your testimony th-that you d-did not hear anything?"

"No I didn't" Harry replied, simply.

Back under control again, she asked "How far apart were you two at the time?"

"Like I said, Madam Umbridge" Harry replied "Susan had been thrown aside by one of the people who attacked us. She crashed into a wall about twenty feet away. I can remember seeing her picking up her wand, but I got kicked in the head and that's it."

She closed on the witness stand and said "This is a trial, Potter! Do you realize what can happen to you if you lie in your testimony!"

"Have a Blood Quill used on me maybe?!" Harry snapped back "Maybe you did it! You hate both of us! Voldemort's a good choice too!!" he raged "Are you working for him!? And it's MR. Potter!"



Again, Umbridge had to bite back a shrill of fury “No more questions!” she gritted out. “Chief Warlock, I request a recess and a private conference with the defense.”

“Any objections?” Dumbledore asked of the Wizengamot. Only eight of the fifty members objected “And the defense?”

Amelia shook her head and answered “No objection, Chief Warlock. We will meet.”

“A thirty minute recess is ordered” Dumbledore said, bringing down the gavel.

Everyone rose as the Wizengamot departed. Madam Bones agreed with Madam Umbridge to meet in Conference Room Six.

“Ami, what’s going on?” a worried Mr. Bones asked.

She squeezed her brother-in-law’s bicep and replied “It’s not uncommon at this stage, Neil. She’ll be offering Susan some kind of deal for a guilty plea.”

“But she didn’t do anything wrong!!” exclaimed the young blond girl sitting next to Harry.

Joan Bones gave her daughter that kind, parental ‘No, you’re not invited’ look that made Harry glad she had spoken first. “We know that, Tina. And, even if she wanted to, your father and I have no intention of letting her.”

“Thanks Mummy” said Tina, tearfully “Can I go with you?”

Neil patted his younger daughter’s shoulders and said “I don’t think so, sweetie.”

“No, Harry. You handled her perfectly, even better than I thought” Amelia was saying at exactly the same time. “You made her lose her cool in open court.”

Harry blushed slightly from the praise "It was mostly your idea" he replied, bashfully "But, couldn't I help?"

"It's exactly because you riled her up so much that you can't be in there" she explained "Will you trust me on this?"

Harry growled, but nodded "Anything else I can do to help, then?" he asked.

"Glad you asked" Amelia replied "Why don't you take Tina for something to eat, on me. Include Ron and Hermione too. Tell them, for me, they did fine." She handed him a couple of Galleon coins.

Susan laughed at the eagerness with which her younger sister latched onto Harry's arm "I was going to ask if I could trust you with my sister." She said lightly "You will bring him back, won't you, Tina?"

"Maybe she will, maybe she won't" Harry teased back. Then, seriously, he asked "You gonna be OK?"

Susan nodded "Oh, Toadface isn't getting a plea out of me. Besides, we did the right thing"

"And without you, I'd've been killed" he whispered in her ear.

Susan rolled her eyes at him "For the millionth time...you're welcome. None of this...matters. What I'll remember from it is you testifying for me and making Umbitch turn purple." She finished with a laugh, wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

"Come along, Susan" Mr. Bones urged.

Left with the blond girl, Harry said "Well, how about we get some ice cream?"

"Sounds like a plan" Tina grinned up at him.

Waiting at the back of the courtroom was a still upset Ron, Hermione and Hannah Abbott.

“Think ya got a little lipstick there, mate” Harry commented with a smirk “And, hey, don’t worry about it. Madam Bones thinks you two did fine. She even gave me a couple of Galleons to take everyone out.”

“So, who’s your new friend Harry?” asked Hermione.

Hannah nodded and added “Yes, Harry, tsk-tsk. It’s rather rude of you not to introduce us.”

“You’ve been coming to my house for years Hannah” she said.

Harry snorted in amusement “That’ll teach you” he commented “Tina, this is Hermione Granger and that’s Ron Weasley. They’re my two best friends.”

“Do you two always kiss in courtrooms?” she asked.

They both blushed vividly. Recovering first, Hermione replied “Err...actually that was the...umm...first time”

“Oh” Tina said “Sorry, it looked like you’d been doing it for years.”

“Tina is Susan’s younger sister” said Harry.

“I’ll be starting Hogwarts in September” the young girl announced “I wanna be in Hufflepuff just like Susan.”

Ron gave her a serious look and said “You’ll have to battle a mountain troll.”

“Uh-Uh” Tina squeaked. Half in denial, half in fear.

Hiding a smirk, Ron added “Yep. Gryffindors have to fight dragons.”

“Stop it, Ronald!” Hermione snapped. “Don’t listen to him. He’s a boy and sometimes boys can be silly. All you have to do is sit on a stool. Professor McGonagall places the Sorting Hat on your head and the Hat chooses your House.”

“Do you really know everything?” asked Tina.

Harry and Ron laughed and nodded “Come on, we’d better hurry if we want that ice cream” said Harry.

“I know a short cut to Florean’s” Tina put in. She grabbed Harry’s hand and led them through a door in the Atrium. The other teens followed and ended up in an alley right beside the ice cream shop.

Ron grinned down at her and ruffled her hair “Darn useful you are” he said. They all got in line and ordered.

“That’s five cones, three chocolate, a vanilla and butterscotch” the clerk said “That’ll be one Galleon nine Sickles please.”

Harry paid and collected the change while the others found a table “What happens now?” Tina was asking, when he joined them.

“Right now, Umbridge is trying to get Sue to accept some kind of deal” Hannah explained “For example, they’re trying to convict her of Murder using an Unforgivable. Since there’s no bod...er...victim, she might offer something called Reckless Endangerment. The maximum for that is five years and not even in Azkaban.”

Harry grumbled moodily.

This led to Hannah snapping at him “I think that’s what she meant when she said you sometimes act like a jerk, Harry. Don’t go acting all miserable when Tina needs all the support she can get.”

“She’ll be alright, won’t she?” Tina asked of the group.

Hannah squeezed the younger girl’s hand and replied “Of course she will. Won’t she Harry?” she glared at the Gryffindor, daring him to say anything other than yes.

“Absolutely, Tina” Harry added “There’s no way Sue’s going to prison” What had started as a fake smile, made its way around the table and they were quickly all smiling. “It’s all gonna be fine” he assured her.

Hermione looked at her watch and said "We should head back, now" They all finished their ice cream and headed back to the door in the alley. By the time they did, the Wizengamot had been seated, although Dumbledore hadn't come out and the Bones family had their heads huddled together.

"Hannah!" exclaimed Susan when she spotted her best friend. She ran forward and they embraced "What happened to you?" asked Susan.

"I overslept by ten lousy minutes" the blond Hufflepuff replied "I'm sorry. I ended up in the back of the courtroom."

Susan felt Harry grasp her hand "So, did she steal you yet?" she asked teasingly.

"Hmm, maybe" he fired back "Pretty cute, that one" Then seriously, he asked "What happened?"

Susan giggled "I plead to attempted murder and serve ten years, covers both charges. Dad told her to stick her hat up her arse."

"How'd Auntie Ami react?" asked Hannah.

Susan laughed more, but didn't get the chance to answer as Dumbledore entered "Has opposing counsel been able to reach a compromise?" he asked.

"No, Chief Warlock" Umbridge replied "The defense was completely unreasonable in--"

Madam Bones was on her feet "Objection!" she protested "Chief Warlock, the details of our conference are not for public consumption. And frankly, the prosecutor's opinion is irrelevant."

"Agreed" Dumbledore continued "Very well, the case will proceed."

Still standing, Madam Bones replied "The defense has no more witnesses to call. We rest."

“Chief Warlock! I protest!” Umbridge exclaimed “The Ministry has not had the opportunity to question the accused in court!”

Madam Bones cut in smoothly “As I’m sure the prosecutor is aware, Section two – Paragraph three clearly states that a defendant need not testify at trial. Besides I do not believe the Ministry has met even a minimum level of proof, let alone--”

“That is a topic for your closing argument, Amelia” Dumbledore scolded. “Which may proceed at this time.”

Madam Bones spoke in detail, knocking down each of the prosecution’s points “Members of the Wizengamot, let me start with actual evidence. Fact, this can’t very well be a murder case when there is no victim. Let alone two. Second, the attempted murder charges are based on illegally obtained evidence. Percy Weasley is a civilian employee of the Ministry and in no way qualified to examine evidence in a criminal investigation. Third, there is not one single witness able to say they saw Susan Bones cast a Killing Curse. Let alone two. Or was it four, since there are two murder charges and two for attempted murder? I’m going to repeat something I said in my opening statement. There is not a witch or wizard alive who would not have used any means at their disposal to protect him or herself and their loved ones in a similar situation. I offer for your review two hundred and forty seven pages of spells and potions that produce a greenish glow. They include a Muggle repelling potion that was used to help conceal the Quidditch World Cup of last year, and a memory erasing charm. There’s also a knitting spell in there, dangerous stuff”

There was a round of chuckles in the courtroom at that comment. Dumbledore silenced it with a couple of gavel taps.

“My final point” she continued “While the title of this case is The Ministry vs Susan Bones, it seems to me that it is more another chapter of Delores Umbridge vs Amelia Bones.”

“Utterly preposterous!” Umbridge exclaimed.

Amelia gave a sarcastic snort "Is that so?" she asked "How many battles did we have as children at Hogwarts? I am certain the Chief Warlock can produce the records. I still have no idea why you carried the grudge you did and, at this point, I couldn't care less. I will not tolerate you carrying this pettiness against my niece!!"

The final word came out in a snarl that Umbridge flinched from.

"As you deliberate, my colleagues, consider some of our own records from Wizengamot debates. Further proof of Delores' petty grudge against me. Thank you for your attention." That said, Madam Bones sat.

Delores stood, offering another of her sugary sweet smiles to the room "My friends" she began "Let me assure you that Amelia--"

"That's Madam Bones. We are most certainly NOT friends" the defense counsel interrupted.

Still smiling, Umbridge said condescendingly "As you wish. Certainly, there is no animosity on my part. Nor, was I aware of any personal conflict with my former classmate. I had no idea Madam Bones felt that way. It makes me very sad." She managed a tear, that she made a display of wiping. "I admit that, as I search my memory, we have often been on opposite sides of debates. Though, maybe it has to do with the nature of criminal trials."

"Load of shit" Harry commented, a little too loudly.

Umbridge ignored it, and the ripple of laughter, continuing "At any rate, we are here to determine fact and as my esteemed colleague reminded us earlier, personalities are irrelevant. Fact, more than twenty witnesses, including several Aurors confirmed the presence of the Killing Curse. Regardless of the smoke screen thrown by the defense this spell came from the accused's wand. Yet another defense smoke screen, saying any of us would have done the same. RUBBISH!! I say!! Members of the Wizengamot, ask yourselves if you really would have been so irresponsible as to risk the lives of who knows how many innocent bystanders by casually casting about the Killing Curse. Unfortunately, we cannot ask the accused that question

since the defense refused to put her on the stand. Meanwhile, you can also ask What is the defense afraid of? For fifteen years now, since the unexplained disappearance of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, thanks to the wise policies of Minister Fudge, we have maintained law and order in our world. So, whatever the defense wants to call it. The behavior of the accused makes her a danger to our society. I ask you. No...strike that...I beg you, get this person off our streets. Don't give her the opportunity to repeat her crime. PLEASE!"

"Harry was right!" Madam Bones shouted "Casting a fifteen year old schoolgirl as a hardened criminal is a load of shit!!"

That brought a loud outburst "SIIIIILENNNNCEEEEE!!" Dumbledore roared above the noise, banging the gavel "Amelia Bones, you are fined fifty Galleons for contempt of court. Having rested, the defense had no place speaking. Your remark is stricken from the record. A letter of apology, both to the court and to defense is also expected. Madam Prosecutor, is there anything else you wished to say?"

"No, Chief Warlock. My closing argument is complete" Umbridge replied "Though I would like to add a note of gratitude for the fair and even-handed manner in which you have judged this trial."

Dumbledore nodded "No thanks are necessary, it is merely my function as Chief Warlock. Court is adjourned to allow the Wizengamot to deliberate on the verdict."

"Are you alright?" Susan asked of Harry, who hadn't moved or spoken. She nudged him lightly.

Looking over, in response, he said in a distracted tone "That's just what McGonagall said" Then angrily "Almost the same words!!"

A fair sized group was invited to a late lunch by Susan's parents. It included Ron, Hermione, Harry and Hannah. They walked out into Diagon Alley. Hannah pointed out a restaurant and they started for it, only to be stopped.



“RONALD WEASLEY! YOU COME HERE THIS INSTANT!!” shouted Mrs. Weasley from across the square. “My son doesn’t owe you a thing. He merely had to obey the Wizengamot’s summons!”

[Review this Story/Chapter](#)

## Dinner With the Bones

“Mummm!” Ron complained. He was holding Hermione’s hand.

“I beg your pardon.” said Mr. Bones “My family was going to eat while we waited for the Wizengamot to return. You’re ...welcome ...to, ahh ... join us”

Hannah didn’t give Mrs. Weasley a chance to reply “After you apologize for that Howler!” she said sharply.

“Neil, I agree with Hannah completely.” Mrs. Bones put in.

Susan crossed her arms and said “Ron, I’m sorry, but I won’t sit with anyone who called me a hussy.”

“Do you see what you and Ginny have caused?!” Ron asked, rebelliously. “Harry never cheated on Ginny! You never even listened to his side! Why are you ta--” Crack! Ron stared at his mother in shock. It didn’t exactly hurt, but it was the first time in many years she’d struck him. And never in the face.

Mrs. Weasley’s hand came up again, this time in her classic lecture position “HOW DARE YO--” she began.

“NO!” Harry yelled, thinking she was going to hit Ron again. Reacting with the speed they’d trained for before the Third Task, his hand slammed into Mrs. Weasley’s arm “No-one-hits-my-friends!” he growled. Lights flickered on and off in a couple of the stores.

Arthur Weasley had just returned to #12 Grimmauld Place after a shift guarding an object in the Department of Mysteries. Don’t-Call-Me-Nymphadora Tonks had just relieved him. This job had nothing to do with either of their official Ministry of Magic duties. “Hi, Sirius.” He said, casually “Where’s Molly?”

“You know she doesn’t talk to me, Arthur” the Azkaban escapee said “There’s a note addressed to you in the kitchen”

“Shit!” Arthur cursed after reading it “Gone to Diagon Alley? I’ll bloody bet!”

Sirius gaped at the usually mild-tempered man “What’s wron--“ he began, but Arthur had disappeared “I really hate being cooped up in this ruddy house! KREEEACHERRR!!”

“Haven’t done that in ages” Arthur complained. He had apparated five feet off the ground and landed with a thud. He flushed red in embarrassment and spun around. No one had noticed, he thought, relieved. But he focused on what had everyone’s attention.

Molly Weasley was cradling her injured arm. She had just been building up a head of steam at the defiance her youngest son was displaying, when Harry intervened. “NOW YOU Listen here...” she started off strong but trailed off, suddenly intimidated.

“What the hell is going on here!?” Arthur asked. He was both angry and scared.

“Dad! Stop!” Ron said sharply.

Hermione added her warning “Wait Mr. Weasley! Harry, please let her up.”

“Come on, Harry.” Susan urged.

Harry released his grip “You should leave!” he said, harshly.

“Arthur, the trial just ended and were going out to eat.” Amelia said “We invited your son to join us. After all, he gave up a day off to testify on Susan’s behalf. Your wife, however, objected. She struck the boy and, to all appearances, was going to do so again.”

“How I discipline my children is my affair!” Mrs. Weasley snapped “As is who I will allow them to associate with!”

Mr. Weasley had become very impatient with his wife. But, he was not going to fight with her publicly “Molly, you and I are going to visit St. Mungo’s to have your arm healed. Ron, I want you to come with

us. Then the three of us will go to Hogwarts. You need to be back, anyway, for classes on Monday. All of us will discuss this entire matter.”

“Arthur, I--” Mrs. Weasley began.

Cutting his wife off, Mr. Weasley said “Not now, Molly. Everyone, I apologize for my wife’s behavior.”

“I’ll see ya later, Harry” Ron said, sullenly.

Harry didn’t know what to say “I...that is...umm Ok. How about I bring something back for you.” He offered.

“Ron, I’ll be there for you” Hermione offered, she linked her arm with his and kissed his cheek.

Ron patted her hand, rather distractedly and replied “Thanks Mione.” then he followed his parents.

“She’s nuttier than Ginny,” Harry commented “I just can’t believe she hit Ron. There’s NO EXCUSE!!” Quite suddenly, Harry yelled in agony and fell to his knees, holding his head.

“Your mind holds such interesting thoughts, Harry”. a ghostly voice said “How convenient that you’ve managed to gather so many of my enemies into one little group”

Harry couldn’t do anything. He didn’t know how to talk in this strange place, nor could he defend himself. He suffered as if he was under the Cruciatus Curse.

“I have been studying you for some time. Most interesting, this connection between you and the girl. I shall have to -- YEEHAHHH!!”

“YOU MURDERED MY PARENTS!!” Harry screamed back “I HATE YOU!!”

Susan was whispering softly to him “Come on, Harry, wake up.”

"Ugh...I feel like sh--" Harry started, he first saw Susan's mother "--Na'anutter hospital...wha'appened? SUE! You're bleeding!!"

Susan shook her head "No, I'm fine, actually this is your blood Harry."

"Oww! My head!" he groaned as he sat up "You sure--"

Dumbledore interrupted him "Hello Harry. I trust you are well." The headmaster wasn't looking at him, as usual.

"Fine" Harry replied resentfully. "Not that you've bothered much lately."

Dumbledore gave a sigh "Harry, I need to know if there's anything you can tell me."

"No." Harry said, coldly "But maybe you can tell me why you're interested all of a sudden and I learned something from Umbridge. Kindly address me as Mr. Potter."

The Headmaster's eyebrows climbed past his hairline "Hmm, well perhaps later," he said "I hope you feel better, Mr. Potter" Turning to Susan's parents he added "The Wizengamot is prepared to render its decision. I will resume the trial in thirty minutes"

"Harry, why all this bad blood between yourself and the Headmaster?" Neil Bones asked.

Harry sighed "Kind of a long story, Mr. Bones. We've...that is...he's made a lot of decisions about me that I don't like. And, uhh...Madam Bones...do you remember how he wouldn't look at me at my trial?"

"Yes, I do" Susan's Aunt replied "But, what does that have to do with now?"

"Since then, he hasn't even said hello to me once. Until today" he replied.

Hannah was nodding in agreement "Professor Dumbledore was teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts when Harry met up with me." she said "Harry said hello and he just turned his back on us."

"That doesn't sound like the Headmaster to me." Mr. Bones commented "But, then again, I didn't really talk to him much when I was in school. At any rate, we should get ready. Stand up, hun." Susan obeyed and he cast "Scorgify" on his daughter.

Harry smiled at that "Much better." he said, as he sat up. "Let's get this over with."

"Don't you--" Susan began

"Want to rest?" Harry finished "No, I've had enough of hospital beds." He stood and wavered for a moment before steadying on his feet.

"Though, you could use a shoulder to lean on" she commented, with a playful grin.

For an instant, Harry frowned. "Well...I guess I'm feeling a little peaked." He smiled at her and put an arm over her shoulders. He felt Susan's arm around his waist.

"All ready" Susan said, looking at her mother.

Neil Bones gave a slightly sour look and said "Right, let's go"

"Where's Hermione?" asked Harry.

Susan replied "She was here for about an hour, then she went back to Hogwarts. Harry, I'm worried."

"Don't be." he offered, reassuringly "You told me yourself, you did nothing wrong. It was self defense."

Susan pecked his cheek. "I know." she said gratefully "But that hag Umbridge, she scares me."

“Neil, I think you need to relax” Joan Bones scolded her husband, not too harshly “Both of our girls are growing up. Tina will be starting Hogwarts next year. And Susan, she’s grown into a remarkable young woman.”

“She is still a litt--” he began

Joan rolled her eyes “Neil, I’m sure she’ll always be YOUR little girl.”

“But she’s growing up” the red-haired man sighed “And she’s almost as lovely as her mother.”

Joan intertwined her arm with her husband’s and said “Flatterer...both our girls are prettier than me because they’re part you too. Now do you think you could go easier on Harry?”

“How do we know he’s not going to be like that Fishly boy?” he grumbled.

Susan’s mother worked to repress a laugh “It isn’t up to us to decide who she dates, or eventually marries. I don’t think so, though. To be honest, this one could last.”

“How could you know that?” asked Neil.

Joan rubbed his arm “Just take my word for it, dear” she said. As they reached the Ministry, a young man waved at them “Frankie!” she exclaimed.

“Mum! Dad!” he called back. “Well. Ain’t this a cozy sight” He kissed his mother and slapped his father on the arm. “Hiya squirt” he added to his youngest sister.

Tina Bones bounced into his arms “Hey Muscles!” she replied “Long time, no see!”

“Aunt Ami” he greeted Madam Bones, as he turned. He effortlessly supported his sister’s weight. Frank Bones had spent five years in the Royal Navy as an engineer aboard a submarine. During those four month tours, he spent his off-duty hours weightlifting. As a result,

Susan's only brother was built like a rock. "Harry Potter, huh?" he said "Frank Bones. Nice to meet you."

Since he still had his right arm around Susan's shoulders, Harry offered his left hand "Hi Frank...Susan left out a few details when she described you." he said, giving her a sour look.

"Hey, Suz, you look gorgeous." He said, he was still holding Tina with one arm "Muggles don't know what they're missing when it comes to robes."

Susan turned pink at the praise "You need to stop wasting lines like that on your sister." she countered.

"Yeah, well" he offered sheepishly "I figured that out, too. Hope you don't mind if I bring a guest to the party."

Susan flashed him a brilliant smile and exclaimed "About bloody time!"

"Excuse me." a Ministry employee said "The Wizengamot is ready."

Susan clutched the hand hanging over her shoulder. Harry squeezed back and they walked into the courtroom. Susan stood at the defense table, next to her Aunt and Harry stood behind her. Susan stood back enough so that they could hold hands.

The members of the Wizengamot entered, followed by Dumbledore. When he was seated, he tapped the gavel and announced "This hearing is called to order. Mr. Speaker, has the Wizengamot reached a verdict?"

"Yes, Chief Warlock, we have" a wizard replied "In the case of The Ministry vs Susan Bones, we find the accused Not Guilty on all counts."

Susan threw her arms around her aunt's neck and slumped against her. She began crying.

"Never any doubt" Amelia said softly in her ear.



Dumbledore tapped the gavel a couple of times and said “Miss Bones, you are free to go. Auror Davies, please remove the Magic Suppressor. I look forward to your return to Hogwarts.”

“Thank you Professor” Susan replied “I missed it, too.”

Harry did something he hadn’t done in a long time. He smiled at Dumbledore. He was curious, and somewhat bothered by the wizard who Dumbledore called Speaker. That lasted a moment, because he was embraced by Susan “Oh! I’m so relieved!” Harry grinned into her hair “If anything had happened to you!”

“Me too, Harry, me too” she replied “WHOOAAHH!”

Frank had lifted her off the ground “Victory!!” he exclaimed.

“Well Amelia, I suppose congratulations are in order.” Madam Umbridge said.

Harry gave her an ugly look “You have no place here!” he snarled.

“Now, now Harry--”

Cutting her off, he said “That’s Mr. Potter to you!”

“No talking back to your superiors, boy!” she snapped. Then, resuming her false smile she continued “I must return to my post at Hogwarts. I’m sure we’ll see each other again Amelia.”

Madam Bones’ look matched Harry’s “Likely sooner than you think, Delores.” she said.

“If you bother my sister again I’ll snap your neck like a twig.” Frank threatened

Umbridge’s face fell “Squibs are the most ill-mannered creatures.” she observed “Expose them all at birth, I say.”

Frank released his hold on Susan and surged forward. He got hand on her neck, just for a moment, before Joan and Neil restrained him "Son, this isn't the time or the place." said his father.

"You're alright, Frank!" Harry chuckled as the distressed witch departed.

The ex-submariner gave a throaty laugh and slapped Harry on the back, nearly knocking him over "You just might be good enough for my sister."

"Th (cough) anks" Harry replied breathlessly.

Susan slapped him "Frank!" she exclaimed.

"My own sister!" he countered, in mock outrage "Anyway, I'll meet you at home."

Mrs. Bones looked unhappy "It's such a long drive" she complained "Just floo back with us"

"Mum, you know I can't" he replied "Paula's a Muggle."

Mrs. Bones grumped a bit at her son, then said "I'm sorry, I forgot. Of course we look forward to meeting her. I just worry with that-that thing you drive."

"So a broom would be better?" he countered "Way in the air?"

Susan and Tina giggled at the old argument "Well, Mum, Harry could get them there in about twenty minutes." she commented.

"Umm, sure". he offered, unaware. At least until Susan nudged him.

Frank kissed his mother's cheek and said "Won't take me an hour. See ya soon. Bye kids." he ruffled both his sisters' hair.

While the adult Bones apparated, Harry followed Susan and Tina through the Floo "Ruddy thing!" he complained.

“Comfortable, Harry?” asked Susan as she ran her fingers across his forehead.

He glanced around, noting a large cushion. Though he was sooty, as usual, his landing had been pleasant “As a matter of fact, yeah.” he replied.

“I’m horrible with landings, too” she said, lightly. She offered a hand and helped Harry to his feet “Merlin, I need to get out of these clothes.”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up at that, earning him a slap in the chest. “Hey! I didn’t say anything!” he said with a smirk. “But if you’re going casual....”

“Dunno, I like the fancy Harry” she replied, running a teasing finger across his chest. She leaned in and kissed him.

That was when Hannah came through the fireplace “Give it a rest, you two! Sheesh!” she complained.

“Hannah, dear, why don’t you Floo your parents and invite them.” Susan’s mother suggested.

Hannah nodded and said “Thanks, Mrs. Bones.”

Frank announced his arrival by spinning out and screeching to a stop in front of the Bones house. By the time he arrived, everyone was dressed down and chatting in the living room. “Never pictured you for rugby, Harry” he commented, lightly “Anyway, Mum, Dad, this is Paula. The youngest is Tina. That’s Hannah Abbott, Susan’s best friend. Next to her is Susan and finally--”

“We’ve met.” said Harry, openly hostile. He’d seen the face before, but it didn’t click until the young woman fully faced him.

She blinked in confusion and said “Ahh...sorry, but I don’t think so. I...would’ve remembered if I had met a handsome bloke like you.”

“Remember babysitting at #4 Privet Dr, Polkiss?” Harry asked harshly.

A surprised Frank asked "How did you know her last name?"

"The Dursleys live there..." said Paula, remembering "You're Dudley?"

"No!" Harry snapped "I'm not the fat oaf! I'm the other one! That's what my aunt called me whenever you babysat!"

Susan stepped in "Look, Harry." she said "Let's just talk calmly about this."

"Alright" he replied "I'm sorry--"

Frank cut him off "Someone better tell me what's going on!" he growled "And they better make it fast!"

"Maybe if I start" Paula offered. She looked apologetic "I did babysitting all over the area, when I was a teenager. My family lives around the corner from Privet Dr. I did work for the Dursleys, twice. Ahh...I was fifteen about then. That would mean Piers was eight. I told them about you and after that the Dursleys stopped calling me. One night, I heard your uncle shouting at my Dad--"

"Meanwhile, one time I went hungry and the other, Dudley broke my arm!" Harry snapped. "Thanks for nothing!"

"There wasn't anything I could do!" she said "No one believed me. And your uncle was my Dad's boss at the time."

That was when Harry decided that it wasn't worth the arguing "Alright," he said "I understand."

"Huh?" asked Paula. And there were confused looks from the Bones family.

"It's sort of like what happened in Sue's case" he explained "She was stuck in the middle, too. Look, I'm sorry. It just brought up some bad memories."

Everyone seemed to relax “I think we should start over” she offered “Hi, Paula Polkiss”

“Harry Potter” he replied. Susan gave him a tiny nudge and he offered a hand “My uncle’s a bully.”

Paula chuckled a little “Yeah, and my brother’s a nice kid. If only he’d find new friends.”

“Is all the drama over, now? Can we eat, now?” an annoyed Frank asked.

Harry laughed at that “You remind me of my friend, Ron. Food first!”

“Smart guy, that Ron” Frank replied

“I’ll let him know you said that” Harry said with a smirk.

They sat around the dining room table and started talking. Mrs. Bones carefully avoided magical snacks, putting out cheese and crackers and ice water to drink. “Don’t overdo.” she announced to the group “I made Sue’s favorites. Roasted potatoes, peas and carrots and a huge meatloaf. It’ll be ready in an hour.”

“Gee, maybe I should get arrested!” Tina quipped, which brought a round of laughter.

Mr. Bones looked at her sternly and said “Christina Bones! You most certainly will not!”

“Why should I be the only one with a record?” Susan added, she giggled behind her hand.

Joan rubbed her husband’s shoulders and said “Cool it, both of you. Your father’s had enough excitement for this year.”

“Yes, Mum.”

“Sorry, Mum.”

"I have a couple of questions." said Paula "How come none of this ever made the papers? I mean, I don't read the Times every day, but still."

Exactly how do you explain Dementors and the Killing Curse to a Muggle? Silence greeted her until Amelia spoke "Well, first, the incident occurred in a small village in Scotland. Barely a thousand people. And, truthfully, I kept the trial low key. I doubt you would have heard of me, outside my nephew, but I'm rather highly placed in government and one of my political opponents exaggerated the situation in an attempt to humiliate me. She even acted as the prosecutor."

"Dinner's ready!" Mrs. Bones announced. Then after everyone was seated she asked "So Paula, how did you two meet?"

"He's my hero!" Paula began.

Frank looked embarrassed, he groaned "Aww come on!"

Then talking while they were all eating she said "Don't be modest. I was on my way home from work when a truck ran me off the road. Practically wrapped my car around a tree. Then Frank came out of nowhere, almost ripped the door off, and ran, carrying me one handed. The tank was leaking. It exploded."

"Y'know there's easier ways to pick up girls." Hannah joked.

"Anyway!" Paula continued, briefly glaring at the pretty blond girl "He drove me to the hospital and stayed with me the entire time. Then he drove me home."

"Is that when he asked you out?" Tina asked excitedly.

Frank shook his head "Don't, please don't."

"Not exactly." an amused Paula replied. Looking her boyfriend straight in the eye she explained "Frank did ask me out...But only after I told him I would have to jump his bones if he didn't."

Frank moaned “My Mother heard that!”

Susan glanced at Harry and blushed “Not a word, Harry.” she whispered “Not a word.”

“I think you have very nice bones.” he whispered back.

Hannah, whose parents were unable to come, had no qualms about an embarrassing comment, or two “So, how are Frank’s bones?” she asked, she popped a potato into her mouth and chewed.

“Quite...good” Paula replied “He’s really strong, but--”

“PAULA!” Frank exclaimed, cutting her off. Though blond haired like their mother, Susan’s older brother had the same bunch of freckles across his face. They entirely vanished as he blushed.

“I think, for the sake of younger ears, we should change subjects.” said Mr. Bones, irritably “Ami, I’d like to thank you for everything you did for us--”

“Three cheers for Aunt Ami!” Frank announced “HIP! HIP!!”

The group replied with “HORRAYYY!!”

“Well, thank you everyone.” said Amelia, acknowledging the cheer “I would like to point out I had a truly brilliant research staff. I couldn’t have done it without them.”

Hannah made a show of rubbing her fingernails and said “I’ll be sending a bill.”

“Smartass!” Susan observed, kicking her friend under the table.

Hannah was going to fire back, but Mrs. Bones interrupted her “Language, young lady!” she scolded “Now, if everyone’s about done with dinner. Let’s have some cake.”

“What kind? As if I didn’t know” asked an eager Susan.

“Chocolate...” said Frank in a bored tone.

“...With chocolate filling” Tina added.

Susan smiled greedily “And the candle?” she asked, curiously.

“Your first victory in court, dear.” her Mother replied “Just don’t make a habit of being the defendant.”

Susan blew out the candle and then suddenly it popped open and squirted chocolate syrup in her face. Quite a bit of it “YEEEAGGGHH!!” she yelled, falling back into her seat. She might have tumbled over, but Harry caught her with an arm around her back. That would’ve earned him a thank you, but he was also laughing “See something funny?!” she snapped as she wiped her eyes.

“Well, yeah...” he replied, still laughing. He ran a finger down her cheek, licked it clean and added “And tasty, too!”

Susan started laughing as well and planted a chocolate stained kiss on Harry’s cheek “I will get you back for this, Tina.”

“Who me?” the youngest Bones replied, looking remarkably innocent.

“How did you do that?” a laughing Paula asked.

Tina gave her brother’s girlfriend a look that reminded Harry of Luna Lovegood “Hmm...can’t really say.” she replied “Like I said, I didn’t do it.”

“Well, hypothetically, then” Paula persisted “How would you have done it?”

For a moment, she looked off into space then flashed a silly grin and replied “Why magic of course!”

“You (giggle) have an int-(snort)-eresting family, Frank” Paula commented.

Frank flashed a frown at his sister before replying “You have no idea.”



“Susan, dear, why don’t you go clean up.” Joan suggested.

Nodding, she said “Ahh...sure...Umm Harry, I still got some in my eyes. Help me get to the loo”

“I gotta introduce her to the twins.” said Harry as he guided her. He was walking behind Susan, with his hands on her shoulders. He gave a gentle push on her left shoulder and said “Okay, turn here....and in.”

“Well, you too” she said, waving him in “Now close the door.”

“Err...ok” he said, nervously.

In a rushed voice, Susan said “Right, scorgify me.”

“What about underage magic?” asked Harry, concerned about his previous run-ins with the law.

“The Ministry only looks for magic use in Muggle homes because of the Secrecy Statutes.” she explained.

Harry cast the spell and all the syrup vanished. Susan’s hair and face were all clean again “Doesn’t quite seem fair that Muggle-borns get in trouble and kids from magical families don’t.” he commented.

“Guess I never thought about it, but you’re probably right.” She admitted. Then in a voice that sent chills down Harry’s spine, she cooed, putting her arms around his neck “We haven’t been alone much, since you woke up.”

Harry’s hands rested on her hips “In a bathroom? In your house?” he asked, looking surprised.

“Harry...” said Susan in a scolding tone “Remember how you described Hermione? You know, tight-assed and all that?”

“Uhh...yeah.” he replied.

She leaned into him and said "Shut up and kiss me." She felt his hands come together at the small of her back and his arms tighten around her. Then his lips were on hers. She felt a squeeze of one of her butt cheeks. She paused in kissing, then decided she liked it and resumed kissing with greater effort. She combed both her hands through Harry's hair.

"Mmm." Harry moaned, pleurably. Emboldened by her responsiveness, Harry slid his hand up Susan's side. This time, carefully above her shirt, rather than under it, he'd taken what happened at Madam Rosemerta's to heart. Just barely touching, he rested his hand on Susan's breast.

After a minute or so Susan broke the kiss, and looked up slightly confused "Hey, its not all that fragile y'know." she said lightly.

"Huh? Oh" he replied "Sorry" Naturally, he pulled his hand away.

Sighing impatiently, but still pressed against him, she asked "Harry, what is it?"

"Nothing." he grumbled, looking away.

"Its not nothing." she persisted "Look, we got a little lost in everything that was going on. Keeping up with school, actually going back will seem like a holiday. And, I hope you remember, there's an important question I still need to say yes to."

"In your loo?" asked Harry, to which she just nodded "Alright. Sue, would you be my girlfriend?"

"Definitely! YES!" she replied enthusiastically, before pulling him into a kiss.

That was when they heard Neil Bones' voice call out "Everything alright, baby!"

"Damn!" Susan complained. She splashed water in her face, getting her hair a little wet. "Coming, Daddy!" she called back. Then to Harry

“One last thing, for now. If I can touch your chest, then its only fair, don't ya think?”

Harry, who had opened the bathroom door, walked right into the wall.

“Come on!” she giggled, locking their arms together. In the dining room, Susan announced, happily “Its official, we're a couple.”

Tina bounced in her seat and cheered, Amelia gave an approving smile as did both Frank and Paula. The only frowns in the room came from Neil, and Joan, who was frowning at her husband. After a silent argument that only a long married couple could have, he said “The best I can do is say I won't forbid it.”

“I don't see that as very fair, Dad.” said Frank into the surprised silence “After all, you don't know Paula even as well as you know Harry and she's ok.”

Susan choked back a sob and said “Well, I guess that's it then. Paula...uhh...nice meeting you. Err...good cake. Mum, I think I wanna go back to school now, please. Harry, help me finish packing.”

“OK.” he replied. Susan had never released his hand anyway. Susan threw herself onto her bed and screamed into her pillow. Harry sat beside her and just rubbed her back.

“YOU THERE! BOY!!” an indignant voice shouted “STOP MOLESTING MY GRANDBABY!!”

Harry yanked his hand away and spun around, wand out “Whozere!?” he demanded.

“Wait! Harry!” Susan exclaimed, bouncing up “It's a painting! Look there.” she pointed to the inside of her bedroom door.

“Oh...sorry” he said bashfully “Who're you?”

The woman was dressed as a 18th Century courtier. She frowned at Harry, then looked at Susan, who said “Ahh...right, Grandmamma, this is Harry Potter”

"Your intended...I see." the portrait said, brightly "However, in my day it was hardly proper for a young lady to have even an intended visiting their private chambers."

Susan, who had completely forgotten her father, replied "I brought him to meet you. Err... Grandmamma we're not quite that far along. Courting might be better. Harry, this is my Fifth Generation Paternal Grandmother Cleopatra Bones. She lived from 1722 to 1841."

"Sounds like a Malfoy name to me" Harry commented.

The woman managed to look offended and pleased at the same time "In fact, my father was the Noble Augustus Malfoy."

"I was right!" Harry grinned

"I was speaking, young man" she said gruffly "Are you, by chance, the same Potter who causes such grief within Malfoy Manor?"

Harry nodded, mutely.

"Father is most displeased, the main line is horribly inbred." she said "He warned Germanicus most strenuously against marrying our cousin. It's a wonder Lucius even had a child, and worse when he married that Black girl -- I'm quite certain the boy is unable to produce an heir"

Harry burst out laughing.

"You, youngster, are the spitting image of your own ancest--" Cleopatra began.

Susan however interrupted "Grandmamma Cleo, Dad for some reason doesn't approve of Harry."

"Oh?" the portrait asked "I have a solution there. Just tap your inner Slytherin, dear."

"?" said Harry's look.

"Harry, you don't get to be Speaker of the Wizengamot without a few Slytherin traits" Susan commented "Auntie Ami was almost sorted into Slytherin and Dad was. Snape's the one that's making them look bad."

Harry thought about that and remembered his own "You're right" he admitted "The Sorting Hat told me Slytherin could lead me to greatness. I didn't want to because of how Malfoy treated Ron and what Ron told me that all bad witches and wizards came from Slytherin. Just kinda hard to picture you there, is all."

"Watch me. Potter." she said, with an impressive sneer "Ouch! That hurts!"

Harry laughed at her and hugged her "You're too sweet to make that stick" he observed "Anyway, I really don't want to see you arguing with your Dad over me."

"Now I know you're one of the good ones." came from outside the door.

Susan opened the door and gave her brother a harsh look "I don't much care for spying." she snapped "How long were you listening? And why?"

"Just long enough to hear that he doesn't want you arguing with Dad" Frank replied "That says a lot to me. Nice to've met you, Harry" He offered Harry a handshake and laughed when he winced "Sorry, big brother thing." he said. Then, turning to Susan, he said "Y'know you're at least my second favorite sister."

She allowed him to lift her off her feet and returned the brotherly hug "Love ya, Frank" she replied.

"Please, no mush in front of the girlfriend." he complained.

Harry, who had very much changed his childhood opinion of Paula Polkiss, said "Goodbye." in a friendly tone.

“He’s a keeper, Susan.” she said “Maybe a tad skinny for rugby. But, a good looking bloke.”

Harry muttered a “Thanks.” as the older couple departed.

“I sooooo did not need to see that!” exclaimed Susan. Paula had given Frank’s butt a squeeze as they departed.

She flicked her wand at a bunch of different things and they neatly filled her trunk “Grab the other end, please, Harry.”

“Sure,” he replied.

Downstairs, the Bones were saying goodbye to Hannah. “Do you have everything?” Mrs. Bones asked.

“Think so, Mum” replied Susan.

Amelia pulled Harry aside “Making me your attorney had a few...shall we say...unexpected results. I received some papers that we should speak about in private.”

“What?” asked Harry, deeply curious.

“Perhaps you’ve seen them before--” she began

Harry shook his head and said “Madam Bones, I’ve never gotten anything other than letters from my friends, my grades and the underage magic stuff.”

“Odd” she replied “We, perhaps, need to have a longer discussion than I thought. My first order of business is minimizing the damage that psychopathic witch and that little sycophant can do to Hogwarts. Can you wait a few days?”

Harry looked disappointed, but nodded “Sure, I guess.” He figured Madam Bones was talking about Percy and Umbridge, but the words were a little over his head. He just let it go. He’d ask Hermione. “AHHH” he jumped. Hannah had just vanished.

“It was a pleasure having you over, Harry.” Susan’s mother said “We really appreciate your support. It meant a lot, especially to Susan.”

Tina had no interest in any formality. She gave Harry an enthusiastic hug “Are you coming for the Christmas hols?” she asked, voice slightly muffled in his chest.

“Don’t know yet.” replied Harry.

She kissed his cheek and declared “You have to.”

“Well, we’ll see.” he replied, feeling heat in his cheeks. He looked at Susan, who didn’t say a word, but had a playful smile. He returned the younger girl’s kiss.

At a nudge from his wife, Mr. Bones said “Well, yes, you did what Amelia suggested quite well. Thank you, Harry.”

“You’re welcome, sir.” he replied a little stiffly. He knew ‘not forbidding’ was a long way from approving. He followed Hannah through the fireplace.

Harry, Susan and Hannah returned to Hogwarts that night without incident.

(a/n): Did one without a cliff-hanger!

## Normalcy

Harry had blissfully slept in his four-poster. Though, he'd become quite used to sleeping in a room by himself. As a result, the early Monday morning bustle of the Fifth Year dormitory woke him instantly. "Wow, what happened to the boy who always sleeps?" he asked cheekily, seeing Ron's wet hair.

"W'out you round 'ermione's been a 'orrible influence on'im." Dean muttered half into his pillow.

Ron walked over to the black boy's bed and violently rubbed his hair, spraying water all over.

"Oi!!" exclaimed Dean "Bloody bugger idiot, Weasley!"

Harry laughed, there was always someone who was last to wake up "Some things never change" he said.

"Nice to see the Golden Trio reunited" said Hannah Abbott on seeing them approach the Great Hall.

Ron acknowledged her with a half nod and steered for the Gryffindor table.

"Don't mind him" Hermione commented "His brain doesn't function until he's had at least three eggs. Morning, Hannah." They'd struck up a friendship ever since the infamous bookstore battle. And during Harry's recovery Hannah would pass any news about his condition to Susan.

"Where's Sue?" asked Harry.

"Gooood Morrrrning, Harry." said Hannah, purposely drawing out the words.

Harry frowned at her "Huh?" he questioned "Did you see her this morning?"



“One track mind.” she commented lightly “Right-- Justin, very politely by the way, asked to talk to her. Finally realized what a little shit he’d been.”

“First a Muggle, now Potter--such a waste, Hannah.” came from behind Harry.

“You just won’t learn, will you Zabini?” Hannah snapped “Detention with Professor McGonagall, two days!” As the disgruntled Slytherin walked off, she added “So help me, if he doesn’t quit I’ll make sure he doesn’t have kids!”

Harry gave a confused look, but instantly lost interest. Susan was walking next to Justin. He felt something grip his chest, he definitely didn’t like it. It faded almost at once when Susan doubled her pace and rushed up to kiss him “Good (kiss) morning.” he said.

“Look, Potter” said Justin, with a touch of impatience “I’m sorry about what happened last year.”

“Did you actually forgive him, Sue?” asked Harry.

“Well, kinda” she replied “I accepted his apology. But, its gonna take a lot to get my trust back.”

Harry kept a firm grip on her waist and said “Well, if it’s good enough for Sue then I guess it’s good enough for me.”

“Could we try again, then?” asked Justin.

Harry stiffened and glared at him.

Hannah’s jaw dropped in shock. “Clueless.” she commented.

“Did you pay attention to anything I said before!?” Susan snapped at him “We might – MIGHT – get to be friends again! But, I’m not even sure I’d go out with you if I wasn’t seeing Harry.”

Susan had more to say, but was interrupted by a tap on the shoulder. It was Professor Weasley “Twenty points from Hufflepuff, Miss Bones. There is no shouting in the hallways.”

“Really Professor, it was my fault” said Justin “Please don’t punish Suz--”

Percy shrugged and added “Very well, I’ll have twenty points from you as well, Mr. Finch-Fletchley”

“That’s not fair!” Harry exclaimed. He was surprised at himself for defending Justin.

Percy snapped his head around “Apparently, you have forgotten my status, Mr. Potter.” he said coldly “Perhaps losing ten points would be a useful reminder.”

“Well said, Professor.” Seamus said, drawn to a Harry disciplining like a moth to a light “Potter needs to be taken down a notch or two.” Ginny, right at his side, nodded.

Recovering from his injuries, and then Susan’s trial had almost pushed Ginny and Seamus out of his head. But Harry did remember that they were suspects in the attack. He pulled Susan behind him “Either of you come closer and, I’ll put you both in the hospital!”

“Expelliarmus!” came from Percy. He had earned his Head Boy badge, his Defence NEWT was good enough for Auror training.

Harry’s half drawn wand clattered on the floor. Seamus laughed and when Harry went for it, he kicked it down the hall. Seamus followed up by pounding Harry with a two-fisted blow to the back. By now, the noise had drawn a crowd out of the Great Hall. So, everyone who could see it, winced when Harry struck back with a nasty punch to Seamus’ groin.

“ooooh!” Seamus squeaked as he fell over.

"Oh no you don't!" shouted Susan, when Ginny went for Harry's exposed back. She snatched at the other redhead's ponytail, yanking Ginny off her feet.

Dumbledore petrified them all; Percy, Susan, Ginny, Harry, Seamus, Justin and Hannah; plus a dozen bystanders. Unfreezing Percy and the other students, he ordered "Everyone else will report to class immediately! Breakfast is over!"

"Professor, that's not fair!" Draco complained "I was still eating!"

The Headmaster shot him an angry glare "If that were the case you would not be here, Mr. Malfoy!" he said angrily "Get to class! And that will be ten points from Slytherin!"

"What!?" the blond boy protested.

Temper flaring Dumbledore said "Make it fifty, Mr. Malfoy! Would you care for one hundred?"

The entire student body fled from the furious Headmaster.

"We wondered if we could help, Professor." Hermione offered in a timid voice, speaking for herself and Ron, who she was holding hands with.

Voice normal again, Dumbledore said "As a matter of fact, yes, Miss Granger. You and Mr. Weasley can assist Professors McGonagall and Sprout moving them into the Hall, while I speak with Professor Weasley in private. Do not un-petrify them. Then you can go to the hospital ward and ask Madam Pomfrey to come. After you do that, report to class. You both have History of Magic, I believe."

"Headmaster! Headmaster!" came from the other end of the hallway. Students took great pains to make way for the owner of that voice "This incident is most disgraceful, you must take action! Harsh and swift!!"

"I entirely agree" said Percy, importantly "I would not wish to overreach, but might I recommend you consider expulsion as an option."

"At the moment, Percival, it is your actions... or, rather lack of, that I wish to discuss" Dumbledore said "First, your punishment of Miss Bones was excessive. Further, you failed to discipline Mr. Finnegan for his comment."

Percy defended himself, saying "Which was entirely supportive of my actions."

"Headmaster, you should be addressing Potter's attack on--"

Dumbledore cut her off "Delores, I will address the main incident in due course. Disciplining a teacher should not take place in front of students. Would you not agree?"

"Of course, but--"

"Your support is most gratifying." he continued "Now, you Percival, more than any other staff member, should have been fully aware of the volatile situation between your sister on the one hand and Harry on the other. Agreed?"

Percy nodded vigorously "I do, sir" he replied

"And yet, you chose to further inflame the situation by disarming Harry." Dumbledore pointed out "Your actions guaranteed physical violence. Until further notice all assigned detentions, be they from staff or prefects, will be proctored by you."

Percy gaped at the Headmaster "But, sir!" he exclaimed "I still have responsibilities at the Ministry and a personal life!"

"I would not presume to tell you how to organize your life, Percival. I remind you that overseeing detention is one of a professor's many duties. But, perhaps, you should re-examine your priorities." Was how Dumbledore replied. He'd considered the middle Weasley as a potential teacher; in five or ten years, that is. But, the boy just wasn't

ready. Add the bad feelings from the Bones girl's trial and the trouble-making twins to the mix and the whole situation was an overheated caldron.

Madam Pomfrey was the first to speak when he entered the Great Hall "Nothing I couldn't handle, Albus. A weak pain potion to treat Miss Weasley. I would recommend a followup exam for Mr. Potter due to his other--err--incident. Mr. Finnegan is most fortunate you petrified him. I've left him that way, he could have died."

"Now then, children..." said Dumbledore in a cold voice "...Explain this problem to me, so I can decide how to resolve it."

"Expel the lot of them, I say." Umbridge offered, including the whole group in the wave of an arm.

Dumbledore gave a severe look and said "That is one option, but not necessarily the best, or even a good one."

"As Hogwarts High Inquisitor, I feel it would be best for the school." said Umbridge.

"Thank you for your input, Delores." he replied "But, bear in mind that I am the Headmaster. And in this case my decision will prevail."

Harry found himself smirking, almost anyone stomping on Umbridge made him smile.

"First, there will be no shouting...at each other or at me. I will discipline anyone who does so, be they student or professor. Or other, Madam Umbridge. Is that understood?" he said harshly. There were nods of understanding, so he continued "Very well, now, that was THE most disgraceful scene I have had the displeasure of witnessing in my time at Hogwarts. That is saying something, I have been here for over a century! We shall hear from Mr. Finch-Fletchley and Miss Abbott first as they were the closest witnesses."

-!#-

Hannah started with Justin wanting to talk to Susan in the Hufflepuff Common Room and finished with being petrified. Justin provided the details of the conversation up to his asking Susan out. Harry gave him a dirty look.

"Well, poor judgment isn't a crime Mr. Finch-Fletchley" said Dumbledore, smiling "Twenty points to Hufflepuff for supporting a House-mate. You and Miss Abbott are dismissed. I will inform Professor Trelawney that your tardiness is to be excused."

!#

Outside, Justin grumbled "All that did was cancel out Weasley's deduction."

"That was the point, git" Hannah snapped at him "Nice move, asking her out right in front of Harry! I'll be keeping my eye on you."

-!#-

Back in the Great Hall, Dumbledore turned to Ginny "Miss Weasley, Madam Pomfrey has reported that Mr. Finnegan will recover in due time."

"Thank you Professor." she replied, looking a little distracted.

"I will release you from morning classes if you like--" he began

Harry cut him off "Oh that's real fair!" he said sarcastically "The only reason they're not both in Azkaban is because of Fudge!"

"What are you saying, Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

Pointing at Ginny, he replied "Professor Moody accused them of trying to kill us!"

"Potter, you cannot possibly believe that fellow Gryffi--" McGonagall said.

Harry cut her off "Oh, really, what about Pettigrew?"

"I never--"

Harry silenced Ginny with a hate filled glare "You're no better! You already said you were glad my parents were dead!!"

"What about what you said?!" Ginny yelled back "And what SHE said about my Mum!"

"THAT IS ENOUGH!!" Dumbledore and McGonagall roared over them both.

Susan spoke in the momentary silence "The bitch deserved worse after that Howler."

"You take that back!" Ginny snarled, getting to her feet, with clenched fists. She went for her wand, which wasn't there.

Harry, who was faster than either girl, grabbed Ginny by her uniform shirt, ripping it at the shoulder and was about to punch her when he was hit by three spells simultaneously.

"Finite" said Dumbledore, waving his wand and releasing Harry "There are four adults in this room and absolutely no reason for you to resort to violence."

"Headmaster, clearly, neither Potter nor Weasley can be permitted to remain in the school" Umbridge said "You should expel them both forthwith."

In one voice, the teens yelled "SHUT UP TOAD!!"

"In fact, their total lack of respect for authority demands it." she added, glaring at them.

It was a moment for the three students. Despite being at war, they'd actually agreed on something. Harry and Susan on one side, and Ginny on the other found themselves grinning. It was Professor McGonagall who shattered it "I am most disappointed that Gryffindors

would behave in this manner. Brawling in the hallway, I expect better.”

“Why?” asked Harry, angrily.

“Explain yourself, Potter!” she demanded imperiously.

Harry wilted a little under her glare, but still came back hard “I don’t think much of a lot of them.” he said “One day I’m a hero, the next day I’m caldron crud.”

“Your House is like your family--” she countered

“Well that’s true!” Harry spat “Just like the Dursleys! Never got much support from them, either!” Then he turned on Ginny “And, then there’s her, her mother and Finnegan!”

Ginny was on her feet again “Don’t talk about my Mother!!” she screamed.

“You even come near here and you’re dead!” Harry snarled, his voice was low and dangerous. He moved in front of Susan.

The three professors were instantly between them. Umbridge moved far more slowly “I trust you see my point, Dumbledore. I assume I can assure the Minister of upcoming expulsions.”

“You may assume what you like, Delores.” he replied “You may leave, your assistance is no longer required.” Turning to Harry, he added “I think, Harry, that you are getting entirely too carried away with this situation. Do you honestly believe Miss Weasley and Mr. Finnegan had anything to do with the incident in Hogsmeade?”

“Moody thinks so!” Harry snapped. “And I meant what I said!”

McGonagall gave a harsh look “Potter, I will not have Gryffindors threatening each other! Further--”



“Somebody” he said, glaring accusingly at Ginny “tried to kill us, Professor. And I won’t let anything happen to Susan! No matter who--”

Dumbledore cut him off “Enough, Harry!” he snapped. Then continuing more calmly, “I have spoken at length with both Miss Weasley and Mr. Finnegan. Both have assured me that they had nothing to do with what happened in Hogsmeade.”

“Prove it!” Harry demanded.

“Harry, I swear I -- that is...err...me and Seamus!” Ginny stammered “We didn’t have anything...umm...it wasn’t us!”

Harry still glared at her. It was Susan who spoke up “I don’t think she did it Harry.”

“What!?” he exclaimed, spinning around.

She leaned in and whispered “Ginny might be a vindictive little bitch.” To which Harry snorted in amusement. Then she spoke up so the professors could hear “But, my auntie told me only top Ministry officials could control Dementors. Students can’t.”

“Well reasoned, Miss Bones” said Dumbledore “Well, Harry, what have you to say to that?”

He sighed and deflated a little “I guess it makes sense, Professor.” he said.

“Then you can see, I trust, that your attack on Mr. Finnegan was uncalled for.” Dumbledore scolded.

That angered Harry all over again “He hit me first!” he shouted.

“Harry, Mr. Finnegan’s injury was quite serious. According to Madam Pomfrey, it was even life threatening.” Dumbledore pointed out.

Harry looked away in shame, but Susan protested “Stop trying to dump guilt on him!”

"Susan!" Professor Sprout exclaimed, entering the conversation for the first time. She was shocked by her student's sudden outburst at the Headmaster.

Susan looked down for half a second, but Dumbledore's comment hit way too close for her "Sorry Professor" she said "What Harry did was defend himself. Its no different than what happened in that alley! Besides, how much school will Finnegan miss?"

"Today, and tomorrow possibly." Dumbledore answered

"HA! Life threatening!" Susan laughed, dismissively "Harry missed three weeks, that's a serious injury! Finnegan got off light!"

All things considered, that made Harry's day. He couldn't help but smile. McGonagall, however, looked harshly at him "What I expect out of this, is no further confrontations in my dormitories, Potter." She demanded "You will address any problems to me or a prefect if I am not available."

"I'll defend myself, or Sue, if I have to Professor." said Harry, bolstered by Susan's support. He stared right back at his Head of House.

McGonagall frowned "Let me make myself completely clear, Potter. I will expel anyone who commits violence on any other student." She declared

"Fleur and Viktor said good things about their schools last year." Harry countered, stubbornly. Honestly, leaving Hogwarts scared him, terrified him, actually. But he wasn't about to show it.

Susan clutched his hand and said "Harry, no, please!" there were tears in her eyes.

"Perhaps I can offer a suggestion" said Professor Sprout.

Everyone looked at her. Dumbledore said "Please, Pomona, I would appreciate any solution that does not involve violence or the threat of

it.” Though he wouldn’t show it, this confrontation had been getting to the Headmaster. He truthfully had no workable solution in mind.

“It seems to me that the best answer is to bring the risk of violence to an irreducible minimum.” she said “To do that, we simply put space between the two sides. It is a simple thing to add another bed and extra space to a dormitory. I have seen Mr. Potter get along fairly well with most of my Fifth Year boys.”

“Brilliant!!” Susan exclaimed.

Harry felt torn. Gryffindor Tower had been his home for five years. Why should he leave!? On the other hand, it would be nice to get away from Finnegan. On the third hand --third hand?-- He’d definitely miss Ron, Neville and Dean. It was Susan’s enthusiastic reaction, and accompanying hug, that decided it. He nodded and said “Alright, sure.”

“Brilliant!!” Susan exclaimed again.

Harry thought of teasing her for repeating herself, but he found his mouth otherwise occupied as she kissed him. He heard Ginny make a disgusted noise. Offending her didn’t bother him at all, he eagerly tightened his grip on Susan’s waist.

“Professor Sprout’s solution will work.” Dumbledore said, after a discrete cough.

Harry and Susan jumped apart, blushing as they remembered where they were “Sorry Professor.” they both said.

“As I was saying” the Headmaster continued, he gave the couple one of his patented twinkily smiles “This is reasonable, at least as a temporary solution. My hope, however, is that eventually you will work out your differences.”

Ginny stayed silent, her face unreadable.

“Rather make nice with Malfoy.” Harry muttered. Susan hid a giggle with her hand and a cough.

Dumbledore chose to misunderstand "That, too, would be pleasant." He said "But onto other matters, now. Harry, it is most important that we discuss how you managed to destroy a Dementor."

"Couldn't be that important if you've been ignoring me all year!" Harry snapped back resentfully

The Headmaster could only sigh "There are other factors that I cannot discuss at this point. However, Dementors are Voldemort's natural allies. It is almost a certainty that they will eventually desert the Ministry for his cause--"

"Don't care much for the Ministry either." Harry interrupted

'Everything is a struggle with the boy.' Dumbledore thought, frustrated. He said "Harry, you are the first wizard in history to be able to destroy a Dementor" No harm in playing to his ego "That single ability could affect the outcome of the war."

Well it's true! Harry thought bitterly. In that moment, he truly loathed the headmaster "Like the whole bloody war's my job!" he complained "Fine! But she's outta here!" With a flick of his hand, Harry indicated he meant Ginny.

"WHAT!!" she yelled, offended.

"Mr. Potter, Miss Weasley is a fellow student and entitled to a certain level of respect." Professor McGonagall scolded.

Harry's temper was up. "Oh! And I'm not! Maybe you didn't hear, but she's happy my parents are dead!"

"Very well." Dumbledore said calmly "Girls, please, as I said Miss Weasley you are welcome to visit the Hospital Wing. Miss Bones--"

Harry grabbed Susan's hand as she stood "Sue stays." he said stubbornly "I think -- that is-- she should hear this." Harry refused to speak until Ginny was gone, and though he was forceful in insisting that Susan stay, he found it hard to meet her eyes.

"Alright, Harry?" she asked, concernedly. She leaned on his shoulder and pecked his cheek.

He nodded, still not meeting her eyes "Third Year, Remus taught me the Patronus Charm. It was because of what happened at that Quidditch match that I asked for help to fight the Dementors."

"Can you?" asked Susan, deeply impressed. As were Professors Sprout and McGonagall.

Harry nodded.

"Show me" she requested "I've never seen one before."

"What you have to understand is that it takes a powerful positive image to power one." he explained, sounding quite like a teacher.

Dumbledore thought that was a very positive development. He wished Harry wasn't so out of control in other areas. So like a certain former Hogwarts pupil.

Harry pulled his wand and bellowed "Expecto Patronum!" The results were less than spectacular. In his opinion it was pathetic.

"Well, its good" said Susan, watching the weak stream of silver Harry's wand was emitting.

Harry looked at his wand as if it had betrayed him "No!" he exclaimed "You don't understand!"

"Professor Lupin told me of your lessons--"

Harry glared at the Headmaster "Remus talks too much." he complained.

"Any Professor giving a student additional lessons reports to me." said Dumbledore in an admonishing tone "But, regardless, the problem I believe comes from the image you are using. And, unless I

am mistaken, it would have to do with your desire to have Miss Weasley depart.”

Harry felt like an open book. He blushed vividly. Was I that obvious? he wondered “Err...yeah...” he mumbled “It was when we were still...uhh...y’know.”

“Then the answer is clear, my boy.” said Dumbledore “If your feelings have changed then, your image must change as well.”

Now Harry could look at his girlfriend “That makes sense” he said “So I guess something with ...” his voice trailed off as he concentrated “Expecto Patronum!”

“Remarkable! Such detail, unheard of!” Dumbledore muttered. He reached out to touch its side, but the stag turned and snapped at him “MY goodness! It bit me!” the headmaster exclaimed.

Professor McGonagall rushed to his aide. Sure enough there was blood on his sleeve “Stop that at once, Potter!” she demanded, pointing her wand at Harry’s patronus.

Prongs growled at her and scraped his hooves on the marble floor, actually making marks on it. The deputy headmistress was quite flustered about it.

“Ahh...professor...I think you should...umm...lower your wand.” Susan suggested.

Dumbledore nodded “I think that a sensible suggestion, Minerva.” he said “The wound is minor.” After she complied, Prongs turned away from both professors, faced Harry and Susan and bowed its impressive head full of antlers.

“Err...bow back, Sue” said Harry, reminded of Hagrid’s class with Buckbeak.

Prongs trotted over to the couple and brushed up against Susan “Look Harry,” she said breathlessly “he has your eyes.”

“What I find astonishing is how it still maintains its form.” Dumbledore commented, the injury forgotten. Prongs growled at the headmaster again.

Harry laughed and patted the stag’s side. Obviously, both he and Susan were allowed to touch Prongs. He couldn’t help but find it funny that Dumbledore wasn’t. “I don’t think Prongs likes being called an it.”

“Are you at all tired, Harry?” he asked “Any problem concentrating?”

Harry shook his head “No, should I be?” he replied.

“I assumed that powering your remarkable patronus would be a considerable effort.” he explained “How do you feel?”

“Good” he sighed “Real good, like nothing’s wrong anywhere.”

Dumbledore nodded, taking note of the response, and asked “What is it like? Touching Prongs?”

“It’s like fire.” Susan answered “Only it doesn’t burn. Kinda like that witch from the Dark Ages, the one that liked getting burned at the stake. I forgot her name.”

“I only have one last question.” the headmaster said “What image was in your mind when you cast the spell?”

At that, blood rushed to Harry’s cheeks “Umm...that is...err...” Even, to everyone’s surprise, a flash of pink appeared on the silvery patronus.

“Most interesting.” Dumbledore commented “Apparently a patronus is much more closely connected to the caster’s emotions than we ever knew.”

Harry felt as if he was being picked on and Prongs snorted angrily.

“Classes will be changing shortly” said Dumbledore “Why don’t you both report to Potions. And Harry, I believe having a silver stag following you around would attract considerable attention”

Harry nodded and Prongs dissolved into sparks of light that faded like embers of a dying fire “Professor, does me moving mean that I’m a Hufflepuff now?” he asked

“Headmaster! I must speak with you privately! Now!” said Snape as he burst into the Great Hall. He pushed past the students, knocking Harry into Susan.

While righting them both, Harry’s face twisted in fury “I-am-sick-and-bloody-tired-of-being-pushed-around!” he growled. He pulled away from Susan ready, to all appearances, to do bodily harm.

“I have no time for the whining of an impudent wretch, Potter.” Snape replied with narrowed eyes “Silencio!”

McGonagall was the first to intervene “It is utterly inappropriate to use magic to discipline a student!!” she ranted. She was bringing out her wand to cancel the spell.

“You loathsome bastard!” Barely heard at first, Harry’s voice slowly pushed through the spell “You SLIMY, GREASY-HAIRED GIT!!”

The Potions Professor’s face went slack with shock, which was from the brat breaking the spell. He reacted with fury at the insult. “How dare you!” he snarled “Even beyond your father’s arrogance! Silencio!”

“Portego!” Harry countered. The spell ricocheted and hit one of the windows, cracking it. “Bombarda!” he shouted as a followup “Stop insulting my father, Snivellus!” The spell was powerful, but Harry’s aim was off. It took a sizable chunk of stone off the wall behind the teacher’s table.

Dumbledore intervened with a disarming spell that split in two and sent both wands flying. Professor Snape’s wand landed near Professor Sprout, who picked it up.



Harry's wand landed on one of the Slytherin tables. Surprising everyone, he just looked over at it and extended his hand. The wand flew into it, and he turned to attack again. Snape didn't have a wand. He hesitated.

"Put it away, Harry!" Dumbledore commanded.

Harry's body shook with adrenaline rush. "No," he said, voice quivering. His eyes went from one professor to the other, then locked on Professor Sprout "No!" Harry repeated, more forcefully "Give him back his wand!"

"No Harry! Stop!" came from Susan. She stepped into his path.

Harry tried to charge around her, but Susan blocked him again "He deserves it!" Harry growled.

"Are you going to hit me, Harry?" she asked quietly "You'll have to, to get at Snape."

That stopped him...cold. Far more completely than the wandless Professor Snape did. He tossed his wand on a table and slumped onto the bench beside it "Of course not, Sue." He said, choking back a sob and looked up at her sorrowfully "I'd never hurt you."

"I know, I know" she replied, twirling her fingers through the hair that hung over Harry's ear.

Professor Snape's voice broke the tender moment "Headmaster," he ground out between his teeth "when I return I am going to demand that brat's immediate expulsion!" He briefly whispered in Dumbledore's ear and departed.

"Harry, you have created a most difficult situation for yourself." said Dumbledore, scathingly.

Harry's hand, which was resting on Susan's hip, clenched into a fist "I am sick of you taking Snape's side all the time!" he said, full of resentment.

"That is Professor Snape, Harry." The Headmaster corrected "Now, attacking a teacher is a serio--"

Harry cut him off, saying "You must be blind! Snape attacked me first!!"

"Potter!" a deeply shocked McGonagall exclaimed

Dumbledore held up a hand "I will handle this, Minerva." he said "Harry, I expect that you will apologize to Professor Snape for both attacking him and for the personal insult."

"I wo--" Harry began. He tried to stand and let loose a tirade, but Susan had been standing between his legs. He couldn't without pushing her.

Susan, despite the importance of her Aunt Amelia, had always considered Dumbledore to be far greater; more than human, almost god-like. Ever since this started -- No, going back further, probably to when she was first included in Harry's group of friends -- she realized the Headmaster was at least flawed. Here, he was just plain wrong. "And when, Professor, will we get an apology for the way he pushed us?" she asked "He insults everybody, but Slytherins, and I've never seen him say anything nice about Harry. He's hated him since our very first class! I don't know how you can hate someone before you met'em!"

"That was awesome!" Harry whispered. He pulled her close, wrapped his arms around her legs and pressed his face into her stomach.

Susan blushed for multiple reasons. Unlike the time she lashed out at Umbridge, this was totally unplanned. She knew why Harry was hugging her, but it was a bit too intimate just now. And, she figured there was a hole somewhere in her robes, because she felt his breath on her bare flesh. It tingled.

"Miss Bones, you do not have all the facts about the matter between Harry and Professor Snape" Dumbledore said, critically.

Harry laughed sarcastically “Well, I can answer that!” he snapped “Snivellius hates me because he hated my Dad! Bet he thought my Mum was a mudblood too!”

“N-ow, Harry” Dumbledore said “Y-ou, as well, do not have--”

Harry jumped on the slight hesitation in the Headmaster’s voice. He slapped the table “I knew it! I’m right!” he snapped “Well, fuck him!”

“POTTER!” Professor McGonagall shouted.

Harry flinched when he realized what he’d said, but he didn’t back down “I’ll tell you what! It’s about time Snape did some apologizing of his own!” Harry demanded, then the puzzle from Susan’s trial snicked into place “Oh, and he can do it publicly too. Just like you wanted me to with Finnegan!”

“To what are you referring, Harry?” Dumbledore asked harshly. He glanced over at the Head of Gryffindor.

Harry didn’t answer the Headmaster, he looked at McGonagall accusingly “Why’d he want me to...and in front of the school? Huh?” he demanded “That wasn’t your idea, was it?”

“How did you reach that conclusion?” McGonagall asked.

In response, Harry just shrugged, shot an accusing glare at Dumbledore and commented “I guess that’s a yes. Anyway...umm... Professor Sprout?”

“Yes, Mr. Potter” she replied.

“Is it still alright if I stay in the ‘Puff dorms?” he asked.

Despite a disapproving look, Professor McGonagall didn’t object. Nor, did Professor Dumbledore. The Head of Hufflepuff nodded and said “Don’t worry about moving your things, I’ll have an elf see to it.”

!#

"That did not go at all well." Dumbledore reflected as the students departed. "It is most distressing to see many of the same behaviors in Harry that I recall from Tom."

"You are completely incorrect, Albus." Professor Sprout said. "I have been observing Harry the entire time, both when he sits with my students and especially today. For you to conclude that he would become like You-Know-Who is unfathomable."

Dumbledore looked at her over his glasses and said "Harry threatened violence more than once. And used dangerous magic in that fight with Severus--"

"Frankly, I am pleased with how he handled himself." McGonagall countered, cutting the Headmaster off. "I noticed how Mr. Potter refrained from any truly dark magic. I have been most unfair...and at your behest. Honestly! Ordering him to apologize in front of the school like that! It was entirely against my better judgment. And, at least when I confronted him later, Potter had the decency to dress me down in private."

Slowly letting out a breath, he replied "After the events surrounding his rescue of Miss Weasley, Harry himself noted the remarkable number of similarities between himself and Tom's unfortunate childhood. Since then, the coincidences have only increased over the years."

"There is a subtle but important difference, Albus." the Head of Gryffindor said "Where Tom was evil despite your best efforts, if Potter were to turn it would be because of you. I believe I will keep my own counsel regarding my students."

The whole situation was coming apart at the seams. "Now, Minerva" he said in an apologetic tone "surely you can see the risk--"

"I wasn't here when He was in school," Sprout interrupted "so I cannot speak to these similarities. All I see is an excellent student, who despite terrible events in his life, is still a decent young man. Severus was disarmed and Harry hesitated. In fact, he insisted that I return his wand, do you think You-Know-Who would have? Did either

of you notice how he stopped for Susan? While you two are arguing think about that!"

Both Albus and Minerva watch in stunned silence as their colleague departed.

Only a couple of days later the Daily Prophet published an article by everyone's favorite columnist.

Normalcy

By Rita Skeeter

Over the past weeks, we have all watched the struggle for power wage back and forth between The Ministry and the Administration of Hogwarts. To refresh your memories, I suggest reading my earlier articles. Particularly, those of October 15 through October 23. Copies are available for a small fee courtesy of The Daily Prophet.

The Headmaster insists that everything is running smoothly and normally. Contradicting this position, Cornelius Fudge, our Minister of Magic, was quoted just last week as saying "With the creation of the position of Hogwarts High Inquisitor and Madam Umbridge's appointment to that vital position, we can be assured that the world's finest institution for magical learning will set new standards for excellence. It is only a matter of time."

I, your investigative reporter, am forced to ask: WHAT IS NORMAL? Regrettably, censorship prevents me from naming names. However, I must report a shocking incident in which a certain well known student dueled with a professor with whom there is a long history of mutual, shall we say, dislike. My source, an eyewitness, says that most definitely, the duel had nothing to do with education. And, most disturbing of all, injury was only avoided by the direct intervention of Dumbledore himself.

In connection with that incident, there was also a violent confrontation between Harry Potter and Seamus Finnegan, the current boyfriend of his former girlfriend, Virginia Weasley. Precisely who started the fight is unclear, however the Tri-Wizard Champion clearly came out better.

Having gone down in one punch, it is clear that Mr. Finnegan was fighting out of his league (Not that I, or The Daily Prophet condone violence).

The Headmaster also intervened here as well, petrifying a large number of students. Estimates range to more than one hundred. Prior to that, though, Harry's Redheads got into it. Susan Bones, who is the niece of Amelia Bones (Minister Fudge's chief rival) attacked Virginia, whose father happens to be a minor functionary reporting to Madam Bones. Precisely why is unclear. No offense Miss Bones, but if Harry is so apparently jealous over Miss Weasley, what are you thinking? And, Miss Weasley, I do suggest you tread carefully. For your father's sake.

In yet another twist on the whole affair, it appears that the long standing rivalry between Slytherin House and Gryffindor House is about to be overshadowed by a Hufflepuff-Gryffindor feud. In a move sure to turn the school on its ear, Professor Sprout has stolen Harry Potter right out from under Professor McGonagall's nose. Quidditch season at Hogwarts should be interesting.

With that, on behalf of the Wizarding community, I ask WHAT IS NORMAL!? Apparently – Brawls in the Halls, Questionable Dueling and Double-Dealing Professors.

## Another Inquisitor

Two weeks after Rita Skeeter's article, Harry was still very much the center of attention. Rita herself was unable to capitalize on the uproar, however. An anonymous tip had been sent to the Ministry that she was Animagus. Considering that the Department of Magical Creatures did not have a registration for her, the scandal seeker was having problems of her own.

Harry had made history (What else is new?) and lots of students were jealous (Big surprise!) that he was the only student in the school, besides the Head Boy and Head Girl, to have access to more than one Common Room. Most of the Hufflepuffs were welcoming on Harry's first day. The Seventh Years were a little pre-occupied with studying for NEWTs. Justin's greeting could best be described as 'polite'. Only one person showed active dislike for Harry.

"Yeah, I know who you are. Big ruddy-bloody-sodding deal!" he said in a surly voice.

Harry blinked in shock. All of that had come out of a boy that lacked a few inches of reaching Harry's chin. Then, he promptly forgot about it in talking to different people. Susan introduced him around in a dizzying display of knowledge. She knew everyone. And, as far as Harry could tell, she knew everything about everyone. "How do you do that?" he had asked.

"Hafta keep up the family tradition." She replied.

One distinctly positive outcome, from Harry's perspective, was that Professor Sprout's idea seemed to have worked. He could still hang out freely with Ron and Hermione, but he didn't have to keep one eye opened while he slept. Even better, was that Finnegan and his girlfriend seemed to be leaving him and Susan alone. Not that he would trust either of them. Now, if only his scar would stop waking him up at all hours.

In other news, Madam Bones had yet to pay Harry her expected visit. She had left him hanging a lot longer than he thought she would. So, he had sent her a letter asking about it.

“What’d you do wrong this time, Potter?” came from the Slytherin table, as grey owl with official Ministry attire landed in front of Harry.

Harry just smirked in response and ignored him. He leaned over, showing the letter to Susan and whispered in her ear. Unable to contain herself, Susan squealed and leaned across the table to tell Hannah.

Defense Against the Dark Arts, under Professor Weasley, was little different than what it had been under Professor Umbridge. Class consisted mostly of reading or test taking. Percy had adopted the former professor’s favorite line as his own “Wands will not be needed today.” was announced daily.

I like reading as much as the next person. But this is ridiculous. It’s boring.

Susan complained in a note to Hermione.

DADA is more practical, like Potions. We need experience.

Everyone has been saying the same thing. It’s a waste of time.

You think Harry will do it?

Hermione sent back

“Is there a problem, Miss Granger?” asked Percy, looking up from his own work.

Hermione jumped and replied “No.”

“That would be ‘No, sir.’ Miss Granger.” Percy corrected “Three points from Gryffindor.” Professor Weasley didn’t give out detentions. Although, only the other staff knew why. The rumor mill among the students still hadn’t quite figured out why.



Draco shared a grin with Vincent Crabbe, then frowned. Despite watching first Seamus, then Ginny and now Percy taking shots at the Golden Trio, siding with a Weasel still rubbed him the wrong way.

“You seem awfully pleased with yourself, Potter.” He accused “Would you care to explain?”

Harry shook his head and replied “No, sir.”

“I insist!” Percy demanded. He left his desk and stood over Harry and Ron. “And what is that, Mr. Weasley?” he asked, noting a letter on Ron’s desk.

“It’s an envelope, Professor.” Ron replied, coldly. “It’s used to send letters, like you never did.”

The class sniggered, drawing an instant reprimand “Two points from everyone!” Percy declared. “Hand it over, Weasley!”

“It’s Harry’s.” Ron said, covering it with his hand.

“That letter has Ministry markings.” Percy noted “As a Ministry Official, I insist upon seeing it.”

Susan coughed in a manner similar to Umbridge. Everyone flinched and looked back at the classroom door. “Excuse me, Professor Weasley,” she said sweetly “But, aren’t Ministry letters only supposed to be opened by the addressee?”

“Silence, Miss Bones!” Percy ordered “Ten points from Hufflepuff!”

Harry gave his girlfriend a questioning look, and she returned a grin and a shrug. “Actually, siirrr,” Harry drawled out the last word “I don’t mind. It’s from Madam Bones. She had something to talk to me about. And she says that if someone asked I should tell them to read tomorrow’s Prophet.”

“That is not very informative, Potter.” said Percy, with a deep frown.

Harry sneered up at him and said "Sorry, Professor. You could always ask her, yourself. She's a real nice person."

"Twenty points from Gryffindor for your cheek, Potter!" Percy snapped. He returned to his desk. Wednesdays were extremely stressful for the Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor. Up next, he had to contend with Seventh Years. Specifically Fred and George Weasley. Percy liked it much better when Potter and Bones were out of school.

At dinner, the twins parked themselves at the Hufflepuff table opposite Harry and Susan "So tell us, what did you do to Professor Weaselby?" George asked.

"He was rather put out." Fred observed.

With a mischievous grin, Susan replied "It's a surprise. Read the paper tomorrow."

"How rude!" George exclaimed, pretending to look offended.

"Well-I-I-I, I think we can spare a detail or two." Harry offered "Ya think?"

Fred offered his best puppy-dog expression and said "Pretty please, Lady Ice."

"Begging's pathetic." Susan commented, then sighed her permission.

Harry leaned his head on Susan's shoulder and said "Auntie Ami's coming to Hogwarts."

"For an extended visit." Susan added "And she's bringing help. Better be on your best behavior."

The twins looked at each other and said "He's the troublemaker!"

"Whatever," Harry snorted "I hope we can trust you with the secret."

"But you hardly..."

“...told us anything.”

Susan laughed, “Perfect then! Shake on it!”

“No thanks.” They muttered.

Susan laughed harder and pulled back her sleeves “Look, nothing up my sleeves.” She said. “It’s not a prank ...well not exactly, anyway... But imagine Umbitch’s reaction to having someone looking over her shoulder like she did at the start of term.” There was a pause, then the boys started laughing.

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“Uhhhhh!” Ginny Weasley sighed. She was sitting with her dormmates and her boyfriend. Anger had pulsed through her when she saw her brothers sit next to THEM.

Looking concerned, Seamus asked “What’s troublin’ me luvly lass?”

“I don’t get it, Seamus.” She replied sadly. “They act like nothing’s changed. I’m the one that ...well you know...They’re all still Harry’s friends. Ron swears by him.”

Marion, her dormmate who despised Harry, hissed “Traitors!”

“They’re my brothers!” Ginny replied angrily. “What if it really is me? What if I’m wrong?”

Seamus pulled away from her “What!” he snapped “And where does tha’ leave me?!”

“Oh Seamus, don’t be like that!” Ginny sobbed, her eyes filling with tears. “That’s not how I meant it! You’re ten...a hundred times... better than Harry! All I meant was what if he really didn’t cheat on me? I said all those cruel things to him.”

“Did you forget what he said about you?” Marion pointed out.

“Well, no, bu--”

Marion cut her off "Look, Gin, we're all your friends." She said "But, the way I see it, family should always come first. That howler your Mum sent was the best ever. Showed everyone she was on your side."

"And I remember you saying your older brothers are on your side." Seamus put in.

"Bill and Charlie...yeah...And I'm happy about that." Ginny replied. She looked down to the end of Gryffindor table where Ron and Hermione were engaged in their unique version of foreplay -- arguing - and desperately fought down a grin. "I miss Ron most of all. We used to be so close. You know, we're not even a year apart."

Seamus pushed a cup toward her and poured from a pitcher "Here Gin," he said "a draft of pumpkin juice'll do ya world o' good."

After downing half of it, she said "Thanks, you're the best."

"I know." He replied. At Ginny's frown, he chuckled and added "Just kidding. Look, now that Potter's been out for a while, maybe I can try again with Ron."

She kissed him enthusiastically, in response, and Seamus was more than happy to return the affection.

"Take your ridiculous display outside!" Professor Snape ordered with a sneer "And that will be five points from Gryffindor. Each!"

Seamus made a dirty face at the Potion Master's back, grabbed his cup and handed Ginny hers "Here's to Professor Snape, a true romantic." He said sarcastically.

"I'll drink to that." Ginny replied in the same tone. She downed the rest of her pumpkin juice and gave a silly smile.

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Flashback

Ron and Hermione kissing in the middle of the courtroom during Susan's trial had been major news that crossed House and Year lines. Within days of the Yule Ball, Fred and George had quietly started a betting pool and whether or not they would ever get together. The problem was not a single student wanted to bet NO. So it became a date and time pool.

When asked if she wanted to participate, Luna Lovegood looked into space for a second, then said "Thank you so much. Put me down for October 20 at 3:08PM, please." She handed George two Galleons.

"How did you get it?" George had asked her, rather awed, when he handed her the pool money (A large bag full of Galleons, Knuts and Sickles). "Only a minute off."

With a dreamy smile, Luna replied "Cupid told me, and he told me your watch was slow."

End

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"How can you be so dense!?" Hermione complained loudly.

Ron slapped the table and growled angrily "RRRR! You know what!? Maybe Harry can make you see reason!" He got up and stormed over to the Hufflepuff table. Hermione was right on his heels.

"Uhh...whatever it is don't get me involved." Harry said nervously. He'd seen them coming.

Hermione laughed and said "Just an act. Glad you're here, Hannah. What do you think of Professor Weasley?"

"Well-I-I-I...err...considering it's his...what I mean..." she rambled, uncomfortably, looking at Ron.

"I think he's a cross between Binns and Snape." Ron offered "Boring and nasty."

Hannah nodded "Like watching grass grow. Sue's told me about your class. But, from my experience, I've never seen him nasty to anyone."

"You're not in the class that has his two least favorite students." Hermione observed "And no one can accuse him of nepotism."

Fred and George shared mischievous grins and asked "What's Neptune got to do with this?"

"Honestly!" she said primly "Don't you two read?"

Harry laughed lightly and asked "Now where have I heard that before?"

"This is important, Harry." She said with a sigh "We can't pass our OWLs without practice."

Beside him, Susan nodded "She's right, Harry. And its not just about grades, either."

"Easy there, Granger. Don't faint." George said.

Fred smirked and added "Yes, Ronnikins, hold your girlfriend tightly so she doesn't co-lapse."

"I have this feeling I'm being set up." Harry said, suspiciously.

"What're you looking at me for?" Susan asked.

Harry looked up and down and just said "Because."

"Oh...ok..." she replied, blushing slightly.

Under the table, Harry stroked her knee at the point where her skirt ended. That much, was something good that had come from his relationship with Ginny. Before, he never liked being touched. Even forgetting the violence from this past summer, which he never would, the Dursleys had messed him up....George flicked him on the temple "Hey! Wha'd'ya do tha' for?" he complained.

"I know Miss Bones is a lovely girl--?" Hermione deadpanned, doing a passable imitation of Professor Sprout. To which the group laughed. "But, this is the thing, Harry. Who was your favorite Defense Against the Dark Arts professor?"

That was an easy one "Lupin, of course." He replied without any thought.

"Ahh...the great Moony!" the twins declared "We owe them so much!"

Susan wanted to ask about that, but Hermione followed up with "Have you ever thought about why?"

"Because we did stuff, like the Boggart and he taught me the Patronus." Harry said after a moment of thought.

"Even Lockhart was better than our dear brother." George added.

Fred and Ron nodded in complete agreement. "Bottom line, Harry," Fred said "We've learned squat this year. And my arse is sore, besides."

"Err..." Harry stammered. He'd never seen the jokester twins so serious.

"We want you to teach us." George put in.

Harry blinked in shock "Me??" he questioned "You're Seventh Years what could I...that is...You must know loads more than me."

"Harry, not even half of the Wizarding population can manage a Patronus mist." Hermione put in, "You managed to drive off a hundred of them, and that was two years ago."

Sighing, he grumbled "Yay, something else to be famous for."

"I didn't know about that." Susan said "And the one you destroyed in Hogsmeade, that day." she added, "No one's ever done that before." Harry still groaned unhappily, so she squeezed the hand that was

stroking her knee and added "Y'know...you gave a pretty good speech before. I'd bet you'd make a good teacher."

Hermione frowned in confusion and asked "What speech? When?"

"Later." Susan answered, with a wave. She winked at Harry and said "In fact, let's make it a bet. If you do good, you can snog me for a good solid hour."

Harry found that very appealing. "But, what if I don't?" he asked.

"Not possible. I'm never wrong." She replied.

They'd worn him down. "But, what about Umbridge? We can't exactly have these meetings with her buzzing around." he asked.

"First we should see how many people are really interested." Hermione said, practically.

That made Harry nervous. "Err...more than just...y'know...us?" he questioned.

"Well, there're a few people who feel the same." Hermione said, she shifted in her seat and avoided Harry's eyes "We've talked about the whole thing while you two were...err...out, as it were."

"Yeah" Ron grumbled "If you two think you're bored, look at us, we've had to do it a whole month longer than you."

Harry laughed sarcastically and commented "Sure Ron, wanna trade?"

"Umm...no." he said, turning red "That's...ahhh....not what I meant."

Harry waved it off "Don't worry about it." He said.

"So, we gonna do this, then?" asked Hannah.

Harry nodded and said "Sure I--" He cut himself off as a passerby gave him a look of pure loathing. It was the same boy from Harry's



first night in Hufflepuff. Harry hadn't seen him since then. "Grab him, Ron." He said.

"Sure." Ron replied, his goalie reflexes kicked in and he had the boy's robes in an eyeblink.

The boy took a swing at Ron and demanded to be "Let go!"

"Cut it, twerp!" Ron snapped, he caught the boy's fist in the palm of his hand.

Hermione hissed at him "Ron! Stop that! Let him go!"

"Ben, please, stop!" Susan said sharply. "Now, Ron, let him go. But Ben don't leave. I think we can clear this up pretty quick. Why don't you tell us what the problem is? Isn't that better than fighting?"

Glaring at Harry, the boy said "He wants me bumped from the team!"

"Huh?" Harry asked. "Look, no offense, but I don't even know you. What are you talking about?" Ron would be scandalized, but he truthfully hadn't thought about Quidditch at all, lately.

A light went off in Susan's head "I get it." She said "Right, here we go. Harry, this is Benjamin Cadwallader, he's Hufflepuff's new Seeker after..." she didn't finish the sentence.

"Cedric." Harry added, bleakly.

"Harry, Hufflepuff would've needed a new Seeker this year anyway." She reminded him. Then, looking at Ben "And from what I heard you're a good one."

Ben nodded enthusiastically "Too right!" he exclaimed "We flattened Gryffi--" he bit the last word off.

"That's fine," Hermione put in "From what I saw you were very good, especially for your first game."

“Yeah, sure.” A disgruntled Ron offered. Hermione poked him in the side and Ron subsided.

Very reluctantly, Harry admitted “I’ve...uhhh...not been ... that is ... erm... Quidditch wasn’t on my mind.”

“Right, now, Ben, since Harry’s the Gryffindor Seeker then he’s not after your spot.” Susan pointed out. “Are you Harry?”

Harry shook his head. “No” he said “and besides, what would I do if Hufflepuff played against Gryffindor?”

“And, maybe, since Harry’s staying in Hufflepuff you two could practice together sometimes.” Susan suggested. Harry frowned, but she gave him a challenging look and added “After all, the Seeker is usually off by themselves, and it’s probably a little lonely, being away from the action.”

Harry and Ben both nodded in agreement. That was when Professor Sprout spoke, the students hadn’t even been aware of her presence. “You handled that quite well, Miss Bones.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed “Didn’t know you were there!”

“That, I imagine, was a difficult situation for you.” The Head of Hufflepuff commented “Have twenty-five points. I think you might follow in your aunt’s footsteps.”

Susan blushed prettily as Professor Sprout departed “That was soooo embarrassing!” she said.

“I think it was brilliant.” said Harry, causing Susan to blush a deeper shade of red.

Hufflepuff’s Seeker had completely changed his attitude “I’m real sorry about before, Harry.” He said in a rushed way. “Can we practice together?”

“Sure, why not?” Harry replied “It’ll be fun.”

Hermione frowned at the idea "You're Third Year, right Benjamin?"

"It's Ben." He replied "So?"

"Well, it's just that Third Year is so important." Hermione replied "It's the first time we pick electives. And besides--"

Ron interrupted her "More importantly, we don't want our game strategies--"

"That's too funny!" Harry laughed.

They both shot him a dirty look and at the same time asked "What's that mean??"

"I think he thought--"

"--your fighting--"

"--would stop!" Came from Fred and George "And now you sound like us!!"

The twins' tennis court comment cracked Harry up for a minute "Do you (hehe) know that actually (haha) know (hahaha) that you were (hehe) agree (heheeh) ing with each other?"

"Arguing is an eggspression of zexual frustration." Hannah quoted.

There were blank stares all around.

Hannah looked surprised "Doctor Ruth." She explained.

More stares.

"Westheimer!"

Shrugs.

"Sex guru?" Hannah asked, more than said.

Unfortunately for Hannah, that was when Luna Lovegood walked by “A good boffing is just what you need.” The Ravenclaw commented “It makes for a happy relationship.” Then she went to the Gryffindor table, nuzzled Neville’s neck and sat beside him.

“I quit.” Hannah groaned. She let her head hit the table.

Harry looked at Ron with a disgusted expression and said “That’s more than I needed to know.”

“You’re the lucky one, mate. Maybe I should change, too.” Ron replied “How’m I supposed to look at Neville now?”

Hermione gave them one of her cold stares and said “He’s your friend, you shouldn’t treat him any differently than you did before.” She saw Susan whisper something in Harry’s ear, to which Harry blushed. “Now THAT I don’t wanna know.”

The group broke up into their own conversations and eating after that. Ron was using a roll to soak up the last drop of gravy on his plate, so he didn’t immediately see what had stopped conversation. Very quickly, the entire Great Hall fell silent.

“Hold onto your hats, everyone! Here it comes!” Susan said, gleefully “Bye, bye Umbitch!”

“Sue! Shh!” Hermione hissed sharply.

Ron spun around looked at the group on adults then turned back to Harry “Bloody hell!” he exclaimed “Why didn’t you tell us!”

“I didn’t know she was bringing an army with her.” Harry said.

“Somehow I don’t think she’s here just as your attorney.” Susan observed.

Hannah nodded and quipped “You think?”

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“Greetings Madam Bones.” Dumbledore said formally, as he stood “Welcome to Hogwarts. May I assist you, this evening?”

Amelia had schooled her face into careful professional neutrality, she hardly spared her niece a passing glance. As she approached the head table, she didn’t look at Umbridge, either, and she addressed herself only to Dumbledore. “Good evening, Headmaster.” She said “Yes, please, first seats for my...err...associates.” Madam Bones wasn’t pleased with all the ones in her group. “Next, a moment of your time. Then, with your permission, I would like to speak to the students.”

“Granddad Gideon!” from the Weasley boys was the first reaction Harry heard. Percy, at the professors’ table offered a formal bow.

“He’s really our great-grandfather. He’s been on the Wizengamot for almost a hundred years.” Ron whispered.

Hermione shook her head and said “One hundred two point four.”

“Hmpf!” Harry snorted “Guess she knows more about you than you do, too. Doesn’t she?”

Ron grumbled “Cut it, Harry.”

“I’d give anything to hear what she’s saying to Dumbledore.” Fred said.

They were too far away to see clearly. So, other than thoughtful strokes of his beard, it was impossible to tell how he was reacting. Although twice, the headmaster definitely was looking at Harry. Finally, Dumbledore’s voice echoed through the Hall “I hope everyone enjoyed dinner. Now, before dessert, please welcome Amelia Bones.”

There was a round of applause. The loudest and longest came from the Hufflepuff table.

“Thank you, everyone, for the warm welcome.” Madam Bones said “It has been a while since I visited these hallowed halls. And ... well ... a

little bit longer since I was a student. And, no, you can't ask how long."

The students laughed.

She continued "Now, the group I head is here to hopefully resolve some of the difficulties the school has had this year. Primarily, we will observe. Classes, study periods, detentions, your free time. We will be glad to listen to your concerns; Professor or student."

"But do not waste our time with trivialities." One of the newcomers said.

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In this case, Harry couldn't help feeling sorry for Ginny. "She looks like she's ready to explode." He whispered to Fred.

"Can you blame her?" Fred asked. To which Harry just shook his head.

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"To continue," Amelia said "Our purpose is to take what you tell us and turn that into real suggestions to improve Hogwarts. However, we are not here as a complaint department to dispute every time a professor deducts points or gives you detention. We do not have that authority. Such things should go to your Head of House, as always. For those of you who do not know me, I am Amelia Bones. I am both Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and Speaker of the Wizengamot. I was in Hufflepuff as a student. But my favorite title is Susan's aunt."

Susan made a display of waving and said "Hi Auntie!" To which there was a ripple of laughter.

"Hmmm...I might have to re-think that." Madam Bones joked "At any rate, I'll let my colleagues introduce themselves."

The oldest man stepped up first. What hair he had was white, tinged with a bid of red "Wait for your elders!" he snapped in a crotchety tone, looking at Mr. Malfoy. "Gideon Prewett...I was in Gryffindor. And this bunch of Weasleys, I'm their mother's grandfather. My dear wife, she was a Hufflepuff. So I might have a few stories for you youn--"

"Stop your babbling you foolish old coot!" Draco's father interrupted. He swept Gideon aside with his cane and stated "Lucius Malfoy. Slytherin. I represent the interests of the Governors in this matter. I am certain my son Draco is well known."

Harry's blood boiled as he saw the old man victimized in the same way Lucius had pushed him in his Second Year. He was half a second behind the Weasleys in pulling his wand. Even Percy was on his feet.

"Tarantallegra!!" Gideon blasted Lucius from where he'd fallen.

The senior Malfoy danced very briefly on the stage, twisted his ankle as he missed a step and fell off the stage. He screamed in pain and rage and yanked his wand from his cane. Gideon stomped on his hand.

"Chiroptera Mucus!!" Ginny shouted. And bats that dripped goo that was a sickly yellow and green grew from Lucius' nose. They grew and attempted to fly, tugging the man around like a puppet on strings. Most of the school laughed at the sight.

Wandless, all Lucius could do is scream. Draco, who had to run right past where Ron was sitting, mysteriously got tripped.

"Miss Weasley! Stop that spell immediately!!" Professor McGonagall yelled.

Ginny glared at her and snapped "NO!"

"Expelliarmus" the Head of Gryffindor said, not too loudly. Ginny's wand flew from her hand and the bats faded, the spell broken.

Holding his face, Lucius roared "I DEMAND THAT BRAT'S EXPULSION!!"

"Considering your actions, Mr. Malfoy, I would not punish Miss Weasley in any way." Amelia admonished him.

Ginny stood there with her mouth hanging open. Susan Bones' aunt, backing her?

"However, I will not tolerate open defiance from a member of my House." McGonagall said harshly "Retrieve your wand and return to your seat. Come to my office before breakfast in the morning."

Dennis, Colin Creevey's younger brother, handed Ginny her wand. "You rock!" he whispered to her.

"That is, of course, your affair Professor." Madam Bones said "As I said before, we are not here challenge the authority of your professors. Finally, let me introduce Xenophilis Lovegood."

"Hello" the editor of what Hermione referred to as a 'wooly paper' said "I'm happy to be here. My daughter is Luna Lovegood, from Ravenclaw."

Madam Bones nodded toward the man and said "Thank you, Mr. Lovegood. It was nice to see someone introduce themselves politely." She gave Lucius an unpleasant look before continuing. "Now, as you may have noticed, each of us are from the different Houses. I felt this would be the fairest way to handle matters. Of course, any one of us would be happy to listen to your concerns. Thank you all."

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"I can't believe it." Hermione whispered "She could be in so much trouble. She could be expelled."

"We must congratulate--"

"--our little spitfire." the twins said, together.



Hermione frowned in response. She glanced toward Harry.

"Kinda scary, but I think I agree with her on that." Harry replied. He looked at Susan a little hesitantly, but she nodded in agreement.

Lucius had regained his composure and was now standing tall among several Slytherin students, including Draco. Mr. Lovegood received a hug from Luna and they were chatting quite happily.

Gideon, still shaken, sat at the front of the Gryffindor table. A First Year girl had offered her seat. He was talking to the girl and Ginny brought Seamus up to introduce them. The Weasley boys got up as well. "Erm...Harry..." Ron said hesitantly "Look...I really don't care for Finnegan, but that's--"

"It's alright, Ron." Harry interrupted, putting on a brave face. In the back of his mind he wished he could just go up now, but he knew better. He could barely imagine having parents, let alone a great-grandfather. "You should go see him."

Ron smiled faintly and got up "Thanks, mate. Look, later--"

"Sure." Harry replied, shortly. Ron hadn't really said much about what happened after the confrontation in Diagon Alley. And Harry didn't blame him. Harry didn't really want to talk to Ron about what had happened after the fight with Seamus, either.

Madam Bones came over, then "Relatives of yours, Ron?" she asked, pointing at the twins.

"My brothers Fred and George, they're Seventh Years." Ron replied "Madam Bones...I was wondering. Why did you agree with Ginny?"

Amelia nodded at the twins in greeting "Nice to meet you, gentlemen." She said.

Ron snorted in amusement, but Hermione discretely elbowed him in the side.

“As I was saying,” she continued, deliberately not noticing Hermione’s action “Anybody pulling a stunt like Lucius did, gets what they deserve. Though, you might mention that dragging him into court would’ve been more satisfying in the long term. Gideon would’ve done well to remember that as well.”

Ron didn’t think so, but he didn’t voice the opinion “Well, I guess it just surprised me.” He admitted.

“I would be lying if I said I liked your sister. But, as long as she keeps her opinions about Susan out of the Prophet, I don’t think we’ll have a problem.” Madam Bones replied.

Ron started to leave, but he turned back to Hermione and asked “You wanna meet Grandpa Gideon?”

“Sure Ron.” She replied, a little shyly.

Harry’s look went from shock to amusement. He laughed and said “Wimp!”

“Shame on you, Harry!” Susan declared, swatting his shoulder.

Harry goggled at her. His mouth opened but nothing came out.

“What about you?” she continued “You looked like you were the one on trial.”

In response, Harry muttered “That’s different.”

“If you say so.” She replied, lightly.

“Aww...poorrrrrrrr ickle Harrikins!!” the twins teased.

“How’d this get to be pick on Harry?” he complained.

Susan leaned her head on his shoulder and patted his chest.

“Madam Bones, I have a question.” Hermione said. “Does this mean you’re going to be an Inquisitor like Madam Umbridge?”

Amelia looked at her a little crossly and replied "I would hope I could do somewhat better than Delores."

"That's not...I mean...I'm not compar--Urrr!" Hermione stammered.

Amelia grinned and said "Sorry, I couldn't help getting into the act. No criticism of Minister Fudge intended, but the Wizengamot feels that additional information is needed."

"In other words, she doesn't trust Umbridge." Hannah commented.

For a second, Madam Bones sneered, then her face went still "Madam Umbridge has the Minister's full support." She said "And, at this point I have no evidence of wrongdoing on her part. I trust we understand each other."

"Yes, Auntie." Susan said. Her toe tapped Hannah's shin.

Madam Bones nodded and said "Good. Now, Harry, I apologize for leaving you in suspense for so long. It has been an extremely busy couple of weeks. This group was not easy to put together."

"Interesting group it is, too." Susan commented.

Looking at her niece crossly, Madam Bones said "Politics is the art of-

--working with people you loathe, for the common good." Susan finished in an exasperated tone of voice. She'd heard that one a million times.

After flashing a momentary grin, Madam Bones turned to Harry and said "The Headmaster has provided us with quarters. You and I have quite a bit to talk about."

"What?" asked Harry, both curious and nervous.

“In private would be best.” She replied. “And this would be a good time since your friends are busy.” She indicated the departing Weasleys and Hermione.

Harry shrugged and said “OK. Sue?” He looked over at his girlfriend.

“My recommendation is that you hear what I have to say before discussing it further, Harry.” Amelia said insistently.

Susan sat back down and said “It’s alright, Harry.”

After a brief kiss with Susan, Harry followed Madam Bones to her quarters. Where, to his surprise, she put up a privacy ward.

## The Best Defense Teacher

"I haven't had a chance to unpack, so forgive me. Please, sit." Madam Bones said as she enlarged her trunk and busied herself with moving things around. Then, after a few minutes she said "Here it is."

Harry was presented with a rather thick bundle of parchment which was entitled, in large bold letters FINANCIAL SUMMARY – POTTER ESTATE. Harry wasn't much for facts and figures, and said so "I see my vault at the start of term, Madam Bones."

"Do you know the phrase tip of the iceberg?" she asked.

To which Harry nodded "When icebergs float most of it is underwater." He replied.

"Well, in this case, I am referring to your family's wealth." Amelia continued "Roughly a week after we signed the representation documents, my office received this. It is the statement that Gringotts sends out every three months to its account holders."

Harry started flipping pages trying to look at everything. It was overwhelming.

"I'll be glad to go over the details with you." She said, interrupting Harry's frantic flipping. "But, for the moment, this tells me you are a very wealthy young man. What concerns me is that you obviously didn't know that. I assume you have never seen anything like this before."

Harry looked up and shook his head. "No, ma'am, never." He replied. "Should I have?"

"Your situation is unique." Amelia said.

Harry couldn't help rolling his eyes, nor could he repress a disgusted snort "What else is new?" he snapped.

"I am trying to help you." Madam Bones said, coldly "However, if you prefer someone else."

Harry's eyes widened in shock "What?! Why?!" he exclaimed. Then he looked away shamefully and said "Oh, I'm sorry, Madam Bones. I'll go now."

"No, Harry, stop." She said, more kindly. "I wanted you to see that when you react like that, you also hurt other people. What happened with Frank's girlfriend was also a fair sample. Save your anger for where it belongs, alright?"

Harry gave a half smile and replied "Alright."

"Good. Now let's move on." Madam Bones said "From what I can guess, one of two things happened. Either Gringotts was instructed to send statements to your guardians--"

Harry could believe that, and that the Dursleys wouldn't tell him "Yeah, Uncle Vernon wouldn't want me knowing I was rich." He said, but then it occurred to him "Except that, if they knew, I wouldn't have any money left."

"Disgusting, if true." she commented "Or, they've been ordered to suppress the statements entirely. But, that could only come from the executor of the estate. And, since you're the only heir, you could have requested it any time."

Harry shrugged "I never asked. I never knew. Who is the executor?"

"That was where I ran into a brick wall." She admitted "The goblin told me and I quote "This authorization does not cover financial matters. Further inquiries must be made through the executor."

Harry scratched his head in confusion and asked "How can you ask someone their name if you don't know who to ask?"

"Made perfect sense to the goblin." Amelia replied with a wry grin "I suggest we both pay a visit to Gringotts. During the week would be best. I wouldn't mind giving his ear a nasty twist."

"If it means getting out of class, make it Snape." Harry said "I'd love to twist his."

"Well, no promises." She replied, slightly amused "But, let us speak on that matter, too. Susan wrote her parents about that incident and frankly, I'm appalled. Harry, let me ask you, seriously; Have you ever done anything to offend that man?"

Harry bit back a sarcastic reply and shrugged "Not that I know of." He replied "This is the first year I ever argued with him in class. Snape started in on my father, like he does. And I just went off."

"First, Harry, you should never have had to tolerate a professor insulting your family. That said, what was different about this time?" Amelia said.

Harry looked down at his feet and muttered a response. Amelia had to ask him to repeat it. He did so, reluctantly "I was still with Ron's sister. We'd just had a fight. It just spilled over--this time -- I guess."

"He has insulted your father before?" she asked

Harry could remember every time the Potions Master had insulted him in class "It started with the first class." He began "...then Snape said 'Clearly fame isn't everything'... Second Year, I was a minute late one day, he took twenty points. Sue came in after me and she got the same. Daphne Greengrass came in even later and he didn't even blink...called Hermione an Insufferable Know-It-All..."

"Is that it?" Amelia interjected when Harry paused after speaking non-stop for over twenty minutes.

Harry blinked in surprise and coughed, his throat was dry. He thanked Madam Bones when she conjured a glass of water for him, then said, a little sheepishly "Sorry about that. Just one other thing, I guess, it came out after the fight. After Snape left, I said something about him calling my Mum a mudbl--well, you know. Dumbledore must've seen it, because he knew about it. So besides my Dad, he hates my Mum too."

“Well, forgetting that it is you specifically, Professor Snape’s attitude is exactly the type of thing we are trying to get rid of.” She said “I feel it would be easier to start at Hogwarts, rather than the Ministry, because prejudice is learned. But, and I’m sorry Harry, we must choose our battles. My first concern is with the High Inquisitor. She must not be allowed influence over Hogwarts.”

Harry nodded, a little dejectedly, and replied “I understand. After what she did to Sue I want to run her out, too. I just wish they could go together.”

“Well, Headmaster Dumbledore rather supports Delores leaving.” Amelia said “But, he has a very different opinion of Professor Snape.”

“He even took Snape’s side after HE attacked me!” Harry complained.

Amelia repressed a sigh “I agree with you, Harry.” She said “And, remember, my niece was involved in that. I am not at all happy with either of them. However, the school as a whole comes first. I’m going to ask that you, Susan, and all your friends try not to antagonize Professor Snape. Re--”

Harry interrupted her, saying “But, that’s no diff--”

“Let me finish!” she cut in firmly “Now, assuming what you’ve said is true, why did you never take this up with your Head of House or Headmaster Dumbledore?”

Harry was annoyed at first, but he thought for a moment and replied “In a way Professor McGonagall is just as scary as Snape. But, with what’s happened this year. Those detentions with Umbridge and the Blood Quills... I don’t think I trust her, either.”

“Well, if you had, I would have a history of complaints to work from.” Amelia pointed out “But, if you don’t, you don’t. Bring me your complaints. Help me build a case. But, it would be a much stronger one if you keep your cool.”

“Maybe you should visit the classes.” Harry suggested.



Amelia laughed heartily and said "I hate to admit it, but Delores is smart. I happened to steal that idea when I put this committee together. During our visit, every one of us will visit every class. First Year through Seventh."

"Fifth Year Potions is Monday, Tuesday and Friday after lunch." Harry volunteered.

She patted him on the shoulder and said "I'm sure you're an excellent wizard, Harry. You'd have to be, given what you've been through. But, somehow, I'm not sure you'd make a good politician. Probably very electable with that face."

"What does all that mean?" Harry asked. He wasn't at all sure if he was being complemented or insulted.

Amelia just chuckled "Never mind." She said lightly. "I think Mr. Lovegood is best suited for that class."

"Okay." Harry said with a shrug. "Madam Bones, can I ask a personal question? It's about Sue. Well, no, it's more about Mr. Bones."

Knowing where this was going, she merely nodded.

"Does--that is--Did I do something wrong?" he asked, nervously.

"Harry, you didn't do anything that boys haven't been doing since long before this castle was built. And Neil is behaving much like every father of a teenage girl does." Amelia explained. But one look at Harry told her he was in over his head. "And you have no idea what I mean, do you?"

Harry shook his head and admitted "Not really. Only had one girlfriend besides Sue."

"Really!" she said in surprise "I'm beginning to see that much of what is said about you isn't true. But, at any rate it explains a lot. Arthur sang praises to you every chance he got after you rescued his daughter."

Harry blushed and said “I had a lot of help from Ron and Hermione.”

“Heroes are expected to have help, Harry.” She said.

Harry’s blush deepened. “How does this help me with Susan’s father?” he grumbled.

“Just count yourself lucky you don’t have my father to contend with.” She said, starting a story “I brought Edgar home to meet my parents. We had turkey for dinner that night. And my father, kindly offering the guest first helping, floated the platter to Edgar and asked ‘Leg or Breast?’ Poor Edgar answered ‘Breast’ He never saw it coming. He was out of the house in under a minute and I was on restriction all summer.”

Harry didn’t understand Edgar’s crime. But, after Madam Bones explained it, he laughed at first. Then Harry paled “But, that’s not fair!” he exclaimed “There’s no right answer! Does Mr. Bones know that story?”

“The truth is I don’t know. If he does, at least you won’t be taken by surprise.” Madam Bones replied “But, it had a happy ending. We owed all summer and Edgar was waiting for me at Platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$  with a single heart-shaped chocolate that was about the size of a Quaffle. But, the bottom line is that I’m certain that if you just show you care, Neil will come around. Now, can we discuss this statement and work out a strategy for Gringotts?”

Harry nodded, and quickly got caught up in what he was being told.

“This is one portion I am very curious about.” Amelia began “It is unusual for land to produce revenue. The taxes are rather high, as well. But, without a breakdown, it is impossible to analyze.....” She talked for nearly two hours.

“Forty million Galleons!” Harry gasped at the end. He was awed, but also quite angry. He didn’t know a lot about money. But, and especially after the last couple of hours, Harry knew enough to know “I coulda lived anywhere...I dunno...maybe the Leaky Cauldron. Hell!

I coulda bought it! Never needed to go near the Dursleys.” He seethed.

“Calm down, Harry.” Madam Bones said, gently but firmly. “Believe me, I know. This raises more questions than it answers. But, now that we have it, we use it to get answers. Now, what we need is the entire history, from I suppose, the day your parents--” she stumbled at that.

Harry nodded “It’s alright.”

“After I understand--this--“ she gestured at the pile of papers they’d been going through “Then I can question this executor.”

“How?” Harry asked “They won’t even tell you who it is.”

“This is why you need to keep cool.” She replied “Goblins aren’t impressed by emotions. They are impressed by money. They will tell you who the executor is and if they don’t, I want you to tell them...”

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Harry was woken up by Ernie screaming in his ear. “Sod off McMillian!” he snapped at his Hufflepuff dormmate.

“C’mon Potter. Fact is, you got us all curious. What’s this big meeting about?” Ernie said.

Harry groaned “How many people know?”

“Dunno” Ernie shrugged “Fifty, give or take.”

Harry rolled his eyes, moaned and flopped back on his bed “Aww, hell, that’s their definition of a few!” he exclaimed

“Well, Hannah told a couple of her friends. I overheard it from Ron Weasley talking to one of his brothers and told Justin. I know that weird girl from Ravenclaw’ll be there--” he said.

Harry shook his head in denial “OK!OK!OK!” he complained “I get it!

“So, where were you, anyway?” Ernie asked “I got up at midnight to use the loo and your bed was still empty.”

Harry laughed “Talking with Madam Bones. You shoulda seen Filch’s face when he tried to drag me off for detention and I had a note. All nice and legal.”

“Wicked!” Ernie laughed “Ten points to Gryffinpuff!”

Harry’s in-between status had been the subject of much conversation. Though, not really the kind of controversy Rita Skeeter had sought. One joke that had developed almost immediately was the merged names. As they were heading downstairs, Harry complained “Nah...I’m in Huffleedor.”

“Whatever, Potter.” Ernie joked back.

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Harry could’ve claimed a seat from one of the younger students, but he was content to lean against a wall and wait for Susan. He stretched broadly and yawned. Even if this day was going to be partially taken up by this meeting Hermione’d put together. And he was convinced it was mostly her doing. Harry was looking forward to his first Hogsmeade visit in almost two months. During their long talk, Madam Bones had assured him that she would station enough Aurors in the nearby village. There would be no repeats on September’s attack. Harry believed her, but that didn’t mean he would let his guard down.

“That’s gross!” followed by a jab to the ribs interrupted Harry’s luxury.

He glared at Hannah and growled “Stuff yourself, Abbott.”

“I foresee a detention in your future for insulting a Prefect!” the blond girl said in a raspy voice.

Harry laughed and countered “Pathetic imitation of Trelawney. And if you do, I’ve got connections in your dorm.”

"She's my best friend, she would never side against me." Hannah said, confidently.

The girl in question leaned her chin on the blond's shoulder and asked "Side against you in what?"

"Morning Sue!" Harry said brightly. "Your--ahh--friend--here wants to give me detention, just so we can't snog."

Susan crossed her arms and glared at her friend "I beg your pardon!" she said accusingly.

"That's not true!" Hannah defended herself "Harry twisted my words!"

Susan's glare turned on her boyfriend "Harry-yyy!" she snarled "It's too early for this!"

"Ok." He said, holding out his hands in surrender.

Susan took his hands in hers and allowed herself to be pulled into a morning hug. Which threatened to turn into a morning snog, until they heard a bunch of First Years giggling. "Can't I turn one into a toad?" Susan whispered in his ear.

"NO!" Harry said, emphatically. He pulled her by the hand to the Great Hall, where, as with any day, breakfast was delicious. Saturdays, the meal tended to last longer as no one had to rush to class.

Everyone waited eagerly for the announcement Dumbledore finally made "Attention students!" his voice filled the Hall "All those with permission slips may proceed to Hogsmeade! I wish you all a pleasant day!"

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It was a different trio that made its way to Madam Malkins' shop. Hermione and Ron had stopped practically at the beginning of the village where the bookstore and the Quidditch store stood across from each other. Harry immediately complained "No way! Two hours

of clothes shopping! Sue, that's almost as bad as detention with Umbridge."

"Stop exaggerating, Potter!" Hannah growled, pushing him from behind.

Insulting laughter echoed from behind Harry. On guard, he spun and half pulled his wand "Wha'd'ya want, Malfoy?" he asked, suspiciously.

"Should be careful, Potter." Draco sneered "Never know when the Weaselette might strike again." He was in the company of Crabbe and Goyle.

Fighting with Ginny was one thing, agreeing with Malfoy was another "I heard they suspected your dear old Daddy for that." Harry shot back "Maybe he's gonna go to Azkaban."

"I'll get you for that, Potter!" Draco threatened and went for his.

Harry's wand came out the rest of the way, quickly joined by Susan's and Hannah's.

"What's the matter, Potter? Afraid to defend yourself? Sending your girlfriends to do it?" Draco sneered. Beside him, Crabbe and Goyle sniggered nastily.

"Sounds fair." Harry taunted back "My girlfriends against yours. Let's wait for Herm--" that was as far as he got.

Crabbe and Goyle looked at each other, then at Draco, who ordered "Get'em!"

Susan and Hannah used the same spell, but Harry didn't recognize it. The effect was hysterical, though. The twin terrors fell flat on their faces, shoelaces knotted together. "Come on, Malfoy!" Harry growled.

"Wait til my father hears of this!" Draco shouted.

"He don't do well against girls either!" Hannah taunted.

Harry looked at her, more than a little impressed. Then burst out laughing.

“Pathetic!” Draco snapped at them. “The pair of you!” He made no attempt to attack Harry.

“Can we go shopping now?” Hannah asked, airily, as if nothing happened.

Harry grumbled “I guess.”

“Come on, Harry!” Susan said, tugging at his elbow. “If you behave, I’ll let you pick!”

“Joy.” Harry said, unenthusiastically.

“You’ll see.” Hannah commented “So, what’cha need?”

Susan shrugged “Well.I.I.I. I’ve grown a bit since last Christmas--”

“Not that I can see.” Hannah replied “You’re still short.”

Susan growled at her friend and hissed “Not that way! PRAT!”

“Ahh!” the blond girl said “Then might I suggest summer wear. Mum told me they were having a sale.”

An hour later, Harry had completely forgotten about the meeting at The Hogs Head.

“Come on, Harry.” Susan said playfully “All done for now. We have some place to be, remember?”

It had been a long hour for The-Boy-Who-Lived. He wondered if it could be classified with the Unforgivables. He was just glad he was wearing loose fitting school robes, otherwise he would never have been able to walk to The Hogs Head.

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“Harry! Where have you been?” Hermione asked, scoldingly.

Ron, noticing Harry’s expression, asked “Alright there, mate? You look a little peaked.”

“Trust me, Ron, if Hermione wants to go clothes shopping...You go!” Harry replied. He gave Ron a thump in the chest.

The owner of The Hogs Head, who refused to identify himself as anything other than “Call me Barkeep.” offered the use of his largest private room. He even put up privacy wards for the students.

Hermione was highly suspicious, complaining “This is not the cleanest establishment in Hogsmeade. And, besides, he’s scruffy looking.”

“Fred and George trust him and that’s good enough for me.” Ron said.

Harry patted her shoulder and said “It’ll do, for now. We can always change, later. Besides, where else could we hide so many...people...” His voice trailed off as he looked around, noticing just how many people. Neville, Dean, Luna Lovegood, a few of her Housemates (though they weren’t sitting near her). The Creeveys and the Patils were there. Harry found it curious they were sitting together like that. He eyed Justin Finch-Fletchley skeptically. Also, Hufflepuffs right up to Seventh Years, including the entire Quidditch Team. Even, looking a little lost, Ben Cadwallader. He noticed a couple of Slytherins, actually four, and was going to say something.

“Harry, look there.” Susan whispered harshly.

“You two! Out!” Harry demanded.

Hermione intervened “Wait Harry! This is my fault...well partially anyway.”

“Well?”

Ron stepped between them and said “C’mon Harry, lighten up.”



“S’alright, Ron.” she said “Look, Harry, I was confirming the time for Lavender, when Ginny passed us. She heard every word. So I did the only thing I could. I invited her. I didn’t think she’d bring--”

“Fine...great...wonderful...” he replied “Have a nice meeting. I’m gone--Sue?” The nod from his girlfriend was all he needed. Harry went for the door.

Ron didn’t move, he said “Wait, Harry, please. Don’t you think everyone should know how to defend themselves?”

“Professor Weasley can teach her.” Harry said, sarcastically. He was glaring at Ginny. “And, as for Finnegan, I couldn’t care less.”

“How about just Ginny, then?” Hermione suggested “I was sort of hoping you might--”

Harry snorted “What? Be friends? You’re joking right! Tell you what, Susan was the one that got bad-mouthed--”

“Forget it!” Ginny snapped “I don’t need lard-ass’s permission for anything! And if you can’t grow up and accept Seamus, it’s not my problem! You can take us both or not at all!”

Harry shrugged and said “Fine by me. Leave. You’re not wanted, anyway. And, Susan’s got a great ass!”

“Thanks for sharing that, Harry.” Hannah quipped. And for a moment the room was silent.

Susan, who had been furious at Ginny, dropped her head into her hands for a minute before looking at Harry. “My ass thanks you.” She deadpanned. Then, she playfully bounced her fist on Harry’s forehead.

Nobody knew where the first one came from, but a snort followed a giggle, which was followed by a guffaw.

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The hilarity went on so long, Ginny got fed up and left. Seamus followed her. Walking back toward central Hogsmeade, The only person she could vent her frustrations on was her boyfriend. "Its not bloody fair, Seamus!" she ranted "All I wanted was to do something with my brothers!"

"It's all Potter's fault." Seamus said in a surly tone.

"He still thinks we had something to do with that attack back in September." Ginny replied

Seamus looked downright nasty "I don't give a rats arse what Potter thinks." He said "And, you know what? Too bloody bad it didn't succeed."

"You don't mean that." She said off-handedly "I wouldn't wis--"

Seamus cut her off, saying "Don't tell me what I don't mean! I missed two days thanks to that sodding bastard! And on top of it Snape gave me detention for missing class and your brother took a bunch of points because I didn't do homework!"

"Don't lump Percy with Fred, Ron and George." Ginny snapped.

"I don't see much difference." Seamus retorted "Ron's best mate nearly kills me. And Professor Weasley punishes me for it!"

Ginny threw up her hands in frustration "Rrrrr! You're not helping!" she complained

"I will get back at Potter for what he did to me!" Seamus threatened "I swear it by Merlin!"

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Hermione had eventually gotten the group down to business. Harry got elected official leader, but somehow, she was still running the meeting. "Alright! Alright! Everyone settle down!" she yelled in the wake of Anthony Goldstein's question. "Now, Anthony asked a fair question! He could've asked it nicer, but that's not the point. Can

anyone name a wizard, besides Dumbledore, that's done what Harry has? Youngest Quidditch Player? Youngest Tri-Wizard Champion?"

"And one wickedly cool Patronus!" Susan added

There were gasps of astonishment at that, some of disbelief, and requests to see it. Harry blushed at the attention.

"I don't think that's wise in public." Hermione said, sparing him. "But, imagine if he can teach us. That alone is probably worth an EE on the Defense NEWT." She sighed wistfully.

Ron smirked at that "Trust Hermione to put it in terms of grades."

"Cut it you." She grumbled. Pink stained her cheeks. "And he's really fast with his wand. He--"

"And how would you know that, Granger?" Fred called out.

George added "Don't you think you should check the Bones first?"

The group roared at the double entendre.

"Ahh...bu..that is" she stammered before getting controlling herself. She stamped her foot and declared "That is most definitely NOT what I meant!"

"Sorry, Granger, that was sooo wrooong of my brother." Fred apologized.

It took some time for the humor to fade.

"Now, if I may continue, PLEASE." She said primly "Experience is the best teacher, they say. What with fighting V-v-oldemort, I guarantee Harry's the best dueler in this room."

"We only have his word for that." Anthony pointed out.

Ron stood up then and added "And Dumbledore's!"

“He’s going off of his!” the doubter replied.

“Forget about that for now!” Hermione cut in “Answer this, does anyone here think Professor Weasley is a good defense teacher? Or Umbridge?”

Some hands went half up, including Harry’s. Those that did were looking at Ron. They quickly dropped when Ron didn’t raise his.

“So, unless there’s someone else that can do a Patronus, then I would suggest that Harry’s the best man for the job.” She concluded, her tone was just a little snide.

The Hufflepuff captain was first to speak “I’m up for it. As long as it doesn’t conflict with Quidditch practice.”

“Hear, hear!” Ron bellowed “I’m with you mate!”

Luna, who had been leaning on Neville’s shoulder, perked up and said “I’d love to see my Patronus. I imagine it’s a Nargle.”

“No such thing!” Anthony declared.

“I’d like to see it, Luna.” Harry said, glaring at the boy giving Luna a hard time. “I’ve never seen one before.”

Luna looked at Harry with a dreamy smile and said “Nargles are hard to find. In fact they often deny their existence. Perhaps Anthony is one.”

“How could you tell?” Fred asked. He grabbed the back of the Ravenclaw’s robes and tugged on them.

George made a show of looking in his ear and added “Well, nothing in here.”

“Gerooff me!” Anthony complained, shoving back at them.

It was amusing, but the twins carried on too long. “Fred! George! Enough!” Harry snapped. “If we’re gonna do this we can’t be fighting

each other!” He didn’t know it at the time, but right then he solidified the group’s loyalty. First, he’d defended Luna. And, now that the twins were going overboard, he backed the same person that had been picking on his friend. Plus, he crossed house lines to do it.

“No prob, Harry.” George said, letting go of Anthony’s head.

Fred also backed away “Yeah, no need to get your knickers twisted.”

“We should all be able to trust each other.” Harry added.

Hermione, who had been thinking ever since Harry’s first comment, said “We could use some kind of oath. Put it on paper, and each one of us could sign it. I think I can enchant it so it couldn’t be signed under false pretenses.”

“Well, I’m not going to sign my life away to Potter.” Daphne Greengrass said.

Ron was on his feet “Well who invited you snakes anyway!?” he demanded accusingly.

“I did, Weasley!” the Hufflepuff Quidditch captain replied “Daphne’s been my best friend since we were in diapers.” She glared at Ron “And if you’ve got a problem with that, wait’ll you see what I do to you next Quidditch match!”

After five years in Slytherin, few people blushed, and Daphne wasn’t one of them. She merely grumbled at her friend. “At any rate, I’ll read it VERY CAREFULLY before I sign anything.”

“If you’re so concerned, why not help me write it?” Hermione said challengingly.

Daphne rose to the challenge “You’re on, Granger.”

“With allies like these, who needs V—Who-Know-Who?” Hannah asked, rhetorically.

“Hush.” Susan hissed at her friend, then added “It should include a pledge to keep the group secret and we all agree that Harry’s in charge, like a teacher.”

“Teacher’s pet, Bones!” the girl next to Cho Chang called out.

Susan bristled and locked eyes with her.

“And something about not fighting amongst ourselves.” Hermione observed. She was scratching away on some parchment. She didn’t even bother looking up. “Last thing on the agenda! We need a name!”

Everyone yelled out something. Harry blushed when Hannah called out Potter’s Army. Potter’s Plotters got a warmer reception. Even from the Slytherin contingent, which didn’t mind being part of a conspiracy. Hermione suggested Dumbledore’s Army, to which Harry frowned and shook his head. Luna’s suggestion got what looked like a majority of heads nodding.

“Right, then. Shall we vote?” She announced “That’s definitely a majority...Okay...The Defense League it is.”

“I agree with Goldstein.” Another boy said. “I doubt Potter’s really the best choice for the job.”

Ron stood angrily and shouted “Then why’d you show up, Smith!?”

“Ronald, please!” Hermione said in an exasperated tone “Now, let me ask you a question. Actually, everybody, do you all remember how Professor Snape beat Professor Lockhart?”

The whole room nodded, with the exception of the two Third Years.

“Well, and not that I condone violence...especially against a teacher.” She continued “But it was Harry in that article that Rita Skeeter published, and the teacher he fought was Professor Snape. Does anyone here think they could beat him in a duel.”

Harry put in “I didn’t actually beat him. Dumbledore disarmed both of us.”

"Which reminds me, Harry..." Hermione said "What incantation did Professor Dumbledore use? And are you sure he disarmed both of you with the same spell? And--"

Susan interrupted "Quiet, Hermione. I was there. Harry almost flattened Snape with one spell. Woulda worked if he hadn't missed. So close, too. Want something to add to our group? A little target practice wouldn't hurt. Something else to think about, Zac...We've all forgotten about what happened with the Chamber of Secrets. How would you have done against a basilisk, I wonder? And, never mind Snape, Harry fought You-Know-Who last year and came back."

"We have one last problem." Hermione added "Where can we meet?" Classrooms were out, because of Umbridge's presence. Also, Percy would certainly report it if he found a bunch of students practicing spells. That problem couldn't be resolved. So, she concluded "Right, how about everyone who wants to come to the next meeting sign their name and we'll let everyone know once something comes along."

After signing Hermione's parchment, the group quickly scattered. Hermione, surprisingly, went off with Daphne. Luna and Neville headed in the direction of the Apothecary, while Harry was left with Ron, Susan and Hannah.

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"Might we have a word, Harry?" George asked. Fred held his hand over his heart and bowed. It might have been a solemn one.

"Sure guys." He replied.

They hesitated then Fred said "Actually, don't think us rude.... But, just us."

"No problem." Susan said "We'll hit the ice cream shop. A little girl time would be nice." She pecked Harry on the lips and took off with Hannah.

“So, what’s up guys?” asked Harry.

Ron got to be spokesman for them “Look Harry” he said “we’re on your side when it comes to what Ginny did. But, really, couldn’t she be part of this? Please?”

“I dunno, Ron.” Harry replied. “I don’t trust her.”

“We know the thing with Finnegan really hurt, Harry...” George said sincerely.

Fred finished the thought “...but this is about people’s lives. And our sister, pipsqueak that she is, is more powerful than she looks.”

“She did do a nice job on Malfoy.” Harry commented with a faint grin “But, seriously, how do I know she wasn’t one of the ones that nearly killed us?”

All three of the Weasley boys looked at each other, then back at Harry. “Do you really believe that?” asked Ron.

“I don’t want to.” Harry replied “But, I know what Professor Moody said, and y’know it does make sense.”

There was another exchange of looks that made Harry wonder if Ron didn’t somehow share the twin telepathy. Then Fred asked “What would it take to convince you?”

“Dunno.” Harry shrugged “Actually, because of the Dementor, Susan doesn’t believe she was involved.”

George gave a sour chuckle and said “Never thought those two would agree on anything.”

Ron laughed louder than the comment deserved, and everyone scowled at him. He grumbled an apology “Sorry!”

“So why isn’t that good enough?” Fred asked “Pretty smart, that girl.”



Harry nodded and grinned "Yeah. About as smart as Hermione. But, different...Softer..." He replied. His smile grew as his voice trailed off.

"Focus Potter!" Fred said, sharply.

George shook his head and sighed "So easily distracted at this age."

"Sorry. Right." Harry said, blushing slightly. "Look, I just wanna know for certain that she had nothing to do with it. After that, we'll see. There's something else, though. It was weird. After Madam Pomfrey took Finnegan to the hospital, Ginny acted weird."

"She's been acting weird all term." Ron pointed out.

Harry shook his head and said "No, Ron, I don't mean that...Well, actually, I do. Damn! This is confusing! Ok, I guess I'm used to her acting all nasty toward me. But, for a little while, she wasn't."

"What do you think that means?" asked Ron.

Harry shrugged and replied "No idea. But, since she's back to hating me again--"

--Fair enough." Fred interrupted "We'll handle it."

"You'll be OK with her joining, then?" George asked.

Harry hesitated and still couldn't give a definite answer "Maybe." He said "It'd have to be something really convincing. I have to know."

"Granger!" the twins declared with one voice.

Ron caught on quickly and said "Yeah, Harry! If its something Hermione comes up with, you'll have to believe. Right?"

"I guess." Harry replied without enthusiasm. He couldn't deny that anything Hermione came up with would probably work. He still wouldn't be exactly thrilled with having his ex-girlfriend around. "There's two other things." He added. "First, she signs that thing Hermione's working up."

The Weasley boys nodded "No problem." Ron answered. "What else?"

"No Finnegan." Harry said "I don't want him anywhere near me."

The redheads looked at each other and back at Harry a couple of times. "But, what if--" Fred began.

"NO!" Harry snapped. Then he continued, a little less harshly "I mean it, guys. No Finnegan. Ginny can take it or leave it."

On that note, they backed down. Ron said "I think I'll go find Hermione. Bet'cha she's in the bookstore with Greengrass."

"Yeah,. who'da thought?" George joked.

"At any rate..." Fred said, imitating Percy "...We, my brother, have important purchases to make. Shall we amble to that fine establishment, Zonko's?"

George bowed to his twin and replied "We shall, sir."

Harry sprinted off for Florean's, with two things on his mind. Having an ice cream with Susan had definite appeal to it. Talking to her about Ginny joining the Defense League, didn't.

## 19 – Classes

The arrival of Amelia's committee had everyone on edge. It also hadn't taken long for word to get around that Harry had had a long conversation with her. Draco, who had been quite humiliated at Hogsmeade, was the first to remark on it that Monday morning. "Guess you're expecting special treatment, just because of your girlfriend, Potter." He sneered at Harry.

"Sit on your hat and rotate, Malfoy." Harry fired back. Great way to start the bloody morning. haven't even had breakfast, yet.

The Slytherin turned red with fury "I'm warning you, Potter!" he snarled "Now that my father's here, being Dumbledore's golden boy ain't gonna help you."

"I don't think Harry has much to worry about, considering with Ginny did to him." Hermione said. That brought a cheer from the nearby Gryffindors.

Draco turned a hateful glare on her and growled "Mudbloods should be seen and not heard, Granger."

"You take that back, Malfoy!" Ron said, maliciously.

That was when Ron's Great-grandfather approached. "Well, well, well" he said jovially. "Ronald, I remember you mentioning Harry Potter. Would this be him?" Gideon slapped Draco on the back and squeezed his shoulder.

"Certainly not!" Draco exclaimed, indignantly. He gagged, desperately trying to catch his breath. "Get your hands off me!" He couldn't move the hand in any way.

Gideon released Malfoy and said "My apologies, young man. Eyes aren't quite what they used to be." He squinted a little and added "Ahh! You must be Lucius' boy. He was a little slow to get up this morning. Some kind of nasal problem, I heard. Off you go, then...there's a good lad."

“You knew who that was the whole time, didn’t you, Grand-dad?” Ron observed.

Gideon gave a grin that made Harry think immediately of the twins. “Never mind that, Ronald.” He said, gruffly. “Introduce me to your friend, there.”

“Yessir.” Ron replied “Grand-dad, this is Harry Potter. Harry, this is Gideon Prewett. He’s my Mum’s Dad’s Dad.”

The elderly man had an iron grip that surprised Harry “N-n-ice to meet you, sir.” He said, wincing slightly.

“The pleasure is all mine, young man.” Gideon replied. “Anyone that can keep Ginevra under control is aces in my book.”

Harry gave a nervous look and replied “Well...actually Fred, George and Ron are my friends. Ginny isn’t.”

“Most unfortunate, that.” Gideon commented. “It seems, I recall, hearing very positive things about you. Especially from Molly.”

Harry bit back a harsh remark and settled for “Things change.”

“Ready for class?” came from a cheerful Susan.

Harry rolled his eyes at her and complained “How can you be so excited about History of Magic?”

“Just think what Auntie would say if she heard that.” Susan scolded him. She took the sting out of it by kissing the back of Harry’s neck.

Gideon coughed delicately and said “Excuse me, young lady, but I do not believe you are one of mine.”

“Quite true, sir.” She replied “But, Weasleys are not the only redheads around here.” Offering a hand she added “Susan Bones.”

“As in—“

Grinning, she confirmed "Susan Amelia Bones, that is."

"Well, well. A pleasure. I see the Bones are still producing beautiful women." said Gideon. He took her hand and kissed it in an aristocratic manner.

Susan's cheeks colored as she replied "Thanks."

"Ahh...if only I were a hundred years younger." Gideon added. "You remind me, very much, of your Great-grandmother." He released her hand.

Harry was quick to take it and pull her closer. "Guess it's time to go to class." He said tightly.

"You'll have to forgive Harry, Mr. Prewett." Susan said, lightly. "He's just a little jealous." She sat on Harry's knee and kissed his cheek.

Harry grumbled "Am not."

"Are too." Susan teased "But, its okay. I still like you." She stood up, pulled Harry to his feet and kissed him again. This time, more deeply.

An angry sounding Professor Weasley interrupted them, saying "I believe it is time to get to class."

"Ahh...Percy...good to see you." said Gideon "I'd love to see you in action. Tell me, what year are you teaching next?" He winked at Harry as he guided Percy away.

Percy's remark faded away "One of my troublesome classes, Grandfather. It's Seventh Year..."

"Guess he's not so bad." Harry said, grudgingly.

Ron giggled and said "Granddad was quite the ladies man in his day. Where we get our talents from."

"Ladies!" Hermione said, archly. "As in plural, Ronald?"

Ron's mouth dropped in shock "Aww...c'mon, Mione! That's not what I mean!" he pleaded.

"My name IS NOT Mione!" she said coldly.

Ron shot Harry a pleading look, but he shrugged unsympathetically and said "Good luck with that, Ronald."

Harry knew he was much better off staying out of it. He put his arm around Susan and they started for class.

"I'm glad History's on the second floor." Susan commented as they climbed a set of stairs. "That way we don't have to pass Professor Weasley's classroom."

Ron paused in his effort to calm Hermione to correct her "That's Weaselby, Bones" he quipped.

"He is a professor, Ronald." She said. "You really should treat him with more respect."

Ron huffed "He's my brother, Hermione. And he's been acting like a git for the past year. Shoulda been in Slytherin, not Gryffindor."

"I'll have you know being Slytherin doesn't automatically make you bad!" Susan snapped, glaring at Ron.

The red haired boy stopped in his tracks and crossed his arms "Tha' bloody hell's your problem?" he growled "You're a Hufflepuff!"

"And my Dad was in Slytherin!" She shot back. "Don't tell me you hate all Slytherins just because they're Slytherins!"

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Ron was left quite speechless. He didn't talk at all during class. That in itself wasn't strange. But, this time he wasn't sleeping. He spent most of History thinking. Occasionally, he'd glance at Susan during the class. Whenever she happened to notice, she would give him a cold glare and look away.

Binns made no notice of his distraction, going on about the Gringotts Treaty which ended a Goblin Revolt and established Gringotts Bank. "And can anyone tell me when the treaty was signed?" the ghost asked in his echoey voice. Indicating Hermione, he said "Yes, Miss Garber?"

"Granger, sir." She began "The treaty was signed in 1219 and ended over seventy years of bloodshed between humans and goblins."

The ghost professor clapped his hands together, and looked frustrated when it didn't make any sound. "Correct, Miss Garber." He acknowledged. "Now, does anyone know what major change occurred in Wizard society as a result of that conflict?"

Hermione's hand immediately started up. But, she stopped, frowning and unsure. Finally, her fingers curled and she lowered her hand.

"Yes, Miss Skeleton." Binns said.

The class had always found that hysterical. Professor Binns rarely got students' names right. But, Susan's was the worst bungle. "It's BONES, Professor." She commented in a long suffering tone. "And the major change was the death of Erdrick, who was the last descendant of Merlin. Up until then, British Magical society was legally a democracy, but actually Merlin's descendants were kings in all but name."

"EXCELLENT!" he praised. Binns' voice boomed unnaturally loud "A masterly summation."

Susan beamed at the praise. Draco's kissy face tease affected her not at all. Harry had laughed along with the rest of the class at the ongoing error in his girlfriend's name. However, he glared furiously at the blond-haired boy.

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At the end of class, he got in her face again "Quite the teacher's pet, ain't ya." He sneered.

"If you can call it that." Susan countered "Why don't we just shake hands and call it a day."

Draco cringed at the taunt, but pressed on arrogantly "Times are changing, Bones. You should get your family in line with the new order."

"Keep your distance, Malfoy!" Harry snapped at him.

Draco sneered back and said "Always so brave when you've got help, Potter."

"Calm down, Harry." Hermione said. "And, Malfoy, take off!"

Draco turned red. "Shut up! Mudblood!" he gritted out between clenched teeth.

"You take that back!!" Ron bellowed and charged.

Hermione grabbed his arm and spun him around. The confrontation was brought to a sudden halt by the harsh voice of Professor Snape. "Enough of this!" he demanded.

"Granger and Weasley were going to attack me, Professor." Draco whined

"Very well, Mr. Malfoy." The Head of Slytherin said tightly "Granger, twenty-five points from Gryffindor and a week's detention. Weasley, the same for you, as well. Now take the know-it-all and get to your next class. You can spend some quality time with your brother."

Harry, mindful of Madam Bones' suggestion, gave Ron's shoulder a firm squeeze ""Ease off, mate!" he whispered.

"I do not require your assistance, Potter." Snape said, glaring down at him. "I have been disciplining students long before you arrived."

"Yes, Professor." He replied, trying to sound respectful.



Snape didn't take it that way. "Enough of your cheek, Potter!" he snapped "You may join your classmates in detention."

"No surprise, there." Harry grumbled under his breath. Whether Snape heard or not, the students didn't know because the black-garbed professor swept away. And, immediately after his departure, his number one ally appeared. With more than a hint of frustration, he said "Hi, Madam Bones. God, I wish you'd gotten here five minutes sooner."

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"Another chat with your favorite professor, I assume." She observed.

Harry nodded and said "Yes ma'am."

"As usual, Professor Snape shows up after Malfoy's done his damage." Susan put in "He called Hermione the M word. Ron went after him and she held him back. That's when Snape appeared."

Madam Bones nodded thoughtfully "Hhmmm." She said "I must admit, the man has an excellent sense of timing. I would say you might just have a point, Harry. Now, let me tell you what I told Harry. You, especially, Ronald. You seem to let insults get under your skin too easily."

"After what he called Hermione!" Ron said, sullenly.

Sighing, she said "The more you respond, the more the instigator digs for more."

"I've been saying that forever, Ron." Hermione said in a suffering tone.

Madam Bones chose to ignore that and addressed Harry "Professor McGonagall has approved giving you tomorrow afternoon off. She did stipulate that you are responsible for all homework assigned."

"Thanks, Madam Bones." said Harry "I'm sure Snape will miss me."

She favored him with a small grin. "Just be ready, Harry. Remember, you'll be dealing with Goblins. They manage our money. But, their first concern is their interests. Most of the time, their number one concern is profit. So, that's fine. However, once in a while, if there is a conflict, they'll act in their own best interest."

"I understand, at least I think so." said Harry.

She patted his shoulder and said "You'll do fine, I'm sure. Now, I know you two like to talk on the way to Susan's Government class." Amelia noted the blush that generated and moved on "But, if it isn't too much trouble, I'd like to chat with her for a while."

"No problem" Harry replied

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Missing Potions made Harry's day. He kept his face carefully blank when he handed the note, a request from the Speaker of the Wizengamot and approved by the Deputy Headmistress, to Professor Snape.

"Yet another special exemption for Hogwarts boy hero." The Potion Master sneered. "Well, I have higher standards. You have until the next session to turn in both homework and in class projects or you will receive a zero for both."

Harry nodded sullenly and said "Yes, Professor."

"Dismissed, then, Potter. Out of my sight!" said Snape.

Harry turned away in search of Madam Bones, muttering "Ruddy git!"

"How'd it go with Snape?" Susan asked.

Shrugging, he replied "Pretty normal. Y'know...No exemptions for the celebrity...At least he didn't insult my parents. I'da hexed him a good one, if he had."

“Officially, I didn’t hear that part.” Madam Bones said. “Now, I’ll give you two a couple of minutes. Then, we should go. Just remember what we talked about, Suzy.”

Susan crossed her arms over her chest and grumbled “Watch the Suzy, Auntie.”

“I think it’s cute” said Harry as he wrapped his arms around her. He grunted then laughed as she poked him in the ribs. “I give, I give!”

She flicked his nose affectionately and kissed him “Try not to hurt anyone at Gringotts. Okay, Harry?” she said with a playful grin.

“Hurt? A goblin!? Me!” he asked, incredulously. “I’m just listening to my attorney.”

After a snort of amusement, Susan said “Yeah, that’s exactly what I mean. Sometimes Aunt Amelia scares me. Look, I hope you know I care about you, Harry. You’ve been troubled since she talked to you the first time.”

“Yeah, I know.” he replied “It’s not that I’m keeping secrets or anything. I just don’t know everything yet. There’s someone hiding things from me. After this trip I’ll lay it all out. I want to hear what you think. Hermione, too. But, Madam Bones said to hold off. That it was important to have all the facts first.”

She laid her head on his shoulder and said “Well, when you’re ready.”

“As soon as I come back.” Harry promised.

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Four hours later, an angry Harry returned to Hogwarts. Dinner was winding down when he arrived. He happened to cross paths with Seamus. Long seconds passed where neither of them moved. But, Harry’s stony expression never wavered. Finally, the Irish boy got out of his way.

“Bloody hell, Harry!” Ron exclaimed “What was that about?”

“He was in my way!” Harry growled. “Next time I’ll stomp him good.”

Hermione gave a stern look “Harry” she said “I wish you wouldn’t go looking for confro--”

“Now’s not the time.” Said Susan, glaring at the Gryffindor girl. “Harry, what happened? You’re all tense. Sit beside me.” She patted the bench beside her. And, after he sat, she rubbed Harry’s neck.

Harry sighed “Thanks Sue. Look, can we all go somewhere?”

“Sure. Come on Ron.” Said Hermione.

This time, Ginny was in his way “I was won--” she began.

“Outta the way!” he said nastily. Harry didn’t stop either. Only Ginny moving avoided a collision. She didn’t follow. “Hermione, you happen to know some place totally secure?”

They were in the central staircase. She didn’t know a definite place. A pop disrupted their conversation. “Dobby hears Harry Potter needs help.” The little elf announced, bowing low. “What can Dobby do for the great Harry Potter and his friends?”

“Dobby!” Harry exclaimed “You scared the sh--”

Hermione cut him off with a nudge “Harry! Language!” she said sharply.

“Right, anyway.” Harry said “Maybe you can help, Dobby.”

Ears flapping almost to the point of becoming airborne, Dobby replied “Anything for you, Harry Potter! The finest, noblest, bestest wiz—”

“Thanks Dobby” Harry interrupted “Do you know of a private place? Something where we won’t be overheard? Either that, or a way to make someplace completely secure?”

“Most definitely, Harry Potter, sir!” Dobby said, excitedly “Follow me, sir! Dobby knows the most safest room in all Hogwarts.”

“Can’t be all that secret if he knows about it.” Ron grumbled.

Dobby fixed him with a glare that could’ve been copied from Lucius “Dobby is a good House-elf!” he declared “Dobby keeps all of Harry Potter’s secrets.” After climbing several flights of stairs, Dobby announced “All Harry Potter must do is walk down that hall three times with his request.”

“I need a quiet place to talk! “I need a quiet place to talk! “I need a quiet place to talk!” Harry said, feeling very silly. That is, until the wall changed suddenly into a massive and ornately decorated door. The four students walked into a room with two mid-sized couches. Harry grinned in delight and declared “Its perfect Dobby! Thank you so much!”

Dobby was absolutely delighted. His face changed from pink, to fuchsia to red to purple “The room will change to whatever you need.” And, with that last bit of advice, he vanished in a puff of pink smoke.

“That has to be the strangest House-elf I’ve ever met.” Susan commented.

Hermione blinked at her and asked “How many do you know?”

“Hmm...” Susan paused in thought “Twenty, maybe thirty I guess.”

Hermione’s look hardened and she said “I suppose you--”

“I what!” Susan snapped back. The two girls glared at each other and flopped into opposite couches.

Harry gave them both a cold look and asked “We’re gonna talk about my problem, ain’t we?”

Ron poked Hermione in the side. She jumped and squeaked “Yeah!”

“Susan?” he asked, with more than a hint of anger.

Looking away, she nodded and said “Of course, please. Sorry.”

“Right. So. It started with a statement from Gringotts. Your aunt figured becoming my attorney during your trial had to do with them sending a report of my accounts to her office instead of to whoever the executor is.” Harry began.

Deeply curious, Hermione asked “Who’s that?”

“Later.” Harry answered, brusquely “First let me tell you about the fight with the head of the bank.”

Susan and Ron, both from magical families, looked awed.

Hermione looked intensely curious. “But Harry, I thoug--”

“So, I walk up, with the Speaker of the Wizengamot...mind you...and...

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“I wish to speak to a senior official, please.” Harry said, politely, but firmly.

A goblin with barely a wrinkle inquired “Vault number?”

“My trust vault is one-eight-seven.” Harry answered “However, my primary family vault is number eighteen. One of the first to be established.”

The young goblin blinked, then recovered “I assume you have both keys.”

“Actually, I have my trust vault key, but I was never given a key to the family vault.” Harry answered.

The goblin looked at Harry as if he were a thief and said “Family vaults may only be accessed by an adult Head of a family. NEXT!”

“WAIT!” Amelia demanded. She was standing to the right and a step behind Harry. “Harry James Potter is the only heir to the Potter estate and of age to access all Potter records.”

Caught in a half-truth, the young goblin cringed “You are?” he demanded.

“Several things.” Amelia snapped back “But, for the moment, I am Mr. Potter’s attorney. My office received financial records that produced a number of questions I wish to ask on my client’s behalf. Likely, these will lead to others and possibly other files.”

“I can authorize no such access.” The goblin said.

That was one of the cues that Harry had been told to look for. He said “That would be why I asked for a senior official. Now, stop wasting my time.”

“Very well.” The goblin said. He gave Harry a respectful half bow and waddled off.

Harry grinned and observed “That worked well.”

“Smirk, yes. Smile, no.” she instructed.

Harry’s face changed and he said “Yes, ma’am”

“You’re doing fine. Just remember, hold that last shot until I signal.” Amelia said “Right. Here we go.”

Approaching the humans was a richly dressed goblin. He carried a walking stick that was topped with a large ruby. “This had best not be a waste of my time, Craggore.” He said irritably.

“Servicing your clients should never be considered a waste!” Amelia said, harshly. “Particularly for an estate as large as the Potters. I have noted a few unusual items on the statement my office received. Not least of which is; why has my client never received statements before?”

"The Bank has been following terms agreed to with the estate executor." The goblin said, defensively. "This included no statements to be sent while the minor child was in the custody of his Muggle relatives."

"Well, I'm here now." Harry said. "And I request copies of my records for review by my attorney. Since my relatives won't see them, that shouldn't be a problem."

Pointing his walking stick at Harry, the senior goblin said "As a child, you are not qualified to review complex financial records."

"And that would be why Mr. Potter has retained my services." Madam Bones cut in "Or, do you doubt my level of reading comprehension. Now, to start with, I require a report of all transactions for the last quarter. Those, I will review here, now."

"--I do not think--" the goblin interrupted.

Madam Bones spoke right over him "Our requirements are small. One of your smaller conference rooms will be sufficient. As long as it is private."

"This is not in compliance with the executor's instructions!" he complained.

Madam Bones raised an eyebrow and asked "Yes, who might that be?"

"Sorry, but that information is strictly confidential--" the goblin began.

Madam Bones cut him off and finished the sentence, impatiently "Yes, yes, and only available through the executor. Of that I am well aware."

"Amelia, I have a question." Harry said in response to a planned expression.

She acknowledged him as if he were her superior "Yes, Mr. Potter."



"The entire account will be mine to do with as I want when I'm of age. Is that correct?" asked Harry

With a predatory smile at the goblin, Madam Bones replied "Certainly, Mr. Potter. On your seventeenth birthday, next year."

"Well, we could wait until then." Harry said, sounding perfectly reasonable.

The goblin grinned "That would be very wise" he said.

"If, however, we did so, I would also withdraw my entire account on that day." Harry said, still in the same reasonable tone. "What is your name?"

"N-Nilcrunch" the goblin stammered. He had been so sure of himself just moments before. The Potter Estate wasn't THE richest, but it generated tremendous fees. Heads would roll. Literally. "Wait! Please!" he exclaimed "Perhaps the branch chief can make an exception. Craggore! A private room and refreshments! At once! MOVE!"

The younger goblin nodded to his superior and bowed to the humans. Harry was reminded somewhat of Dobby. "This way, please." He requested. Then, opening a richly decorated door that opened on a room meant for twenty dominated by a marble table surrounded by equally impressive chairs. "Sir, Madam, I hope this is satisfactory."

Madam Bones looked unimpressed "Nothing better, I suppose?" she asked as she glanced around. "I believe your superior offered refreshments. Firewhiskey for myself, butterbeer for Mr. Potter. Kinision, of course."

"At once!" Craggore snapped. He bowed and rushed out of the room.

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"I'll never cross you." Harry said, a little fearfully. "And this reminds me of pictures I've seen of Buckingham Palace."

Amelia dropped her façade and smiled “We’ll have nothing to quarrel about, Harry. As long as you continue treating my favorite niece like she deserves.”

“Mr. Potter, Madam Bones, I am Ragnor.” A new goblin said on entering. “What is the problem, today?” This goblin wore ordinary clothes. No outward sign of his position. But, he didn’t need to.

Madam Bones had told Harry not to stand, or bow. In this case, Harry was the one wronged. “Yes, there is a major problem. Your underlings are denying me access to my accounts.” Harry said, bluntly.

“Entirely untrue!” Ragnor replied, annoyed “All educational expenses have been paid for the last four full years, plus one half of the current term. You, Mr. Potter, have regularly accessed your trust vault; Withdrawing modest sums on each visit.”

“And who was going to tell me about the forty million Galleons in my parents’ vault, huh?” Harry snapped.

Looking briefly at a document, Ragnor said “That would be the responsibility of the estate executor.”

“Heard that before!” Harry snapped. “We’re done here! Amelia, when we return to Hogwarts, please prepare a letter ordering the complete withdraw of all funds from Gringotts. The Royal Bank of Scotland sounds good. I saw a TV commercial over the summer.”

Madam Bones hid a smile behind her political face. She had outlined what he should say. But something inside her wanted to jump to obey. Harry carried it that well. She made a mental note to remind her niece’s teenage boyfriend who the adult was --later--, and gave into the impulse. “Yes Mr. Potter.” She said.

“Such a transaction would have a serious adverse affect on this institution!” Ragnor said, angrily “Gringotts has done a great deal for the Potters over the centuries! Where is your loyalty?”

She could tell Harry was stumped, so Amelia replied "My client wonders the same thing. What has Gringotts done for him for the last fifteen years? After all, Mr. Potter was not raised in the Magical World."

"Perhaps we can come to a compromise." Ragnor offered. As a Branch Chief he knew, even more than Nilcrunch, the punishment for losing an account the size of Harry's. He had seen a whole family obliterated for the loss of a much smaller client. His head was already at risk even if he salvaged the situation. "There is a substantial accumulation of documents. Your assistance in storing it would be appreciated. I could reduce the delivery fee to a mere thousand Galleons."

"Mr. Ragnor, considering Grigotts is supposed to deliver these statements free of charge and that we would be unburdening you, I would think the bank should be glad to supply the owls. Please have the last 15 years statements delivered to my office." Madam Bones finished her speech with a kindly smile.

Harry, in a moment of inspiration, added "My owl, Hedwig, doesn't get out much. I wouldn't mind if she helped. I'm sure she'd enjoy getting out more."

"Well, thank you, sir, for your generous offer." Ragnor said. Most of his mind was already on how he would explain his actions to the Board of Directors.

"There is one final thing." Madam Bones said "My client would be very grateful if he could have at least a copy of his parents' will."

Ragnor nodded solemnly and said "I will try. And Mr. Potter, please accept my personal apologies. Gringotts will do its best to assist you."

"I hope so." Harry said, ending the meeting.

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The Branch Chief watched them go. He regretted not being able to tell the full story, but doing so would've violated his honor.

“Dishonorable human!” Ragnor growled “My hopes for your vengeance, Harry Potter. Though I doubt I will see it.”

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“Whooooo!” Ron whistled “Wish I coulda seen that. Bill always says goblins need a little telling off once in a while.”

Hermione looked worried “Was blackmail necessary?” she asked “It might not have been legal.”

“I think it was brilliant!” Susan exclaimed “And besides--”

Harry giggled, finishing the sentence “--Auntie Ami was with me.”

“And do you call her Auntie Ami to her face?” Susan teased.

Harry looked horrified and exclaimed “Hell! No!”

“Gotcha!!” Susan declared with a hearty laugh.

Harry glared at her for a moment then attacked her knees, which she had conveniently draped across his legs. “Who’s got who?” he asked over her squeals.

“Haaarrrreee-eeeeeee!!” Susan screamed as he relentlessly tickled her. “NOO-HOOOo-PLREEEESEEEEE!!” Quidditch is very good for strengthening your grip. She couldn’t pull his hands off her legs.

Releasing her, Harry smirked “That’ll teach ya.” He said.

“Bully.” Susan pouted. She made to slap Harry’s shoulder, but he caught her hand. Surprised, her eyebrows shot up and she asked “What now?”

Susan’s laughter had faded, but she was still breathing heavily. Harry did the only thing that made sense. He turned her hand and kissed it. Right where the palm meets the wrist. Ron and Hermione long forgotten, he whispered “How was that?”

"You're still a bully." She pouted again. "But that wasn't bad." She combed her fingers through his hair and said "Now kiss me proper."

One hand slid up Susan's leg to her waist. The other, Harry put behind her neck and gently pulled her closer. He felt her smile against his lips, then they parted and her tongue entered his mouth. A few minutes later, semi-coherent, Harry said "Really hafta thank Dobby for this. Best room inda whole school."

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"Dobby's bloody brilliant!" Ron declared breathlessly.

Hermione scolded him "Must you curse, Ronald?" but it was without her usual fire.

Harry noted that Hermione's hair was far bushier than normal "Didn't need to see that, mate." He said.

"Take a look in the mirror!" Ron threw back at him. Then they both laughed.

Hermione observed "Y'know, if we can keep it a secret, this would be the best place to hold the DL meetings."

"Hate to give up a great snogging place, though." Harry put in.

Trying to organize her hair, Susan said "Won't have to. We don't have to show everyone how to open it."

"I say we have our meeting tomorrow night." Hermione said.

"So, Harry, how long before Madam Bones sorts all that out?" Ron asked

Harry replied "Well, she knows there's something going on. But, she doesn't know what. It'll take a week of non-stop owls, just to deliver all those statements. She really needs a good accountant, she said."

“Gotcha covered, mate!” Ron said, glad to be of help. “Never guessed he’d come in handy. Got a cousin in the trade.”

Harry agreed “Sure, why not? We’ll tell Madam Bones tomorrow.”

“Less talk, more snog.” said Susan. She slid deeper into the couch and pulled on Harry’s tie.

Harry was eagerly complying when Hermione interrupted “We should go back. We don’t want to be caught after curfew.”

“ARGH!” Harry growled, his lips had been inches from Susan’s. “You’re both prefects, ain’t ya?”

Hermione gave a disgruntled look and said “That isn’t the point. We don’t take advantage of it.”

“Much.” Added Ron, with a pleased smirk.

Hermione swatted him across the chest. Susan and Harry laughed at that and the color bursting across Hermione’s face.

“I really don’t wanna get caught out after curfew, Harry.” said Susan.

Harry ran a finger over her lips and said “We won’t be, trust me.”

“We better not be. Or else...” Susan grumbled. She caught the finger between her teeth and nipped him. Then, she gave in to the look she saw in Harry’s eyes.

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In the Fifth Year Hufflepuff girls’ dormitory at 11:47, Hannah Abbott bolted upright in her bed. “It’s mid-night! Where the bloody hell have you been?!” she demanded.

“Shhhhhh!!” Susan hissed “First! You’ll wake everyone up! Second, its not mid-night.”

Hannah grabbed her by the arms and pulled her into the bed. After drawing the curtains and slapping on a silencing spell, she exclaimed "You know what I mean!"

"Well, it's not mid-night." Susan said, with a smirk

Hannah slapped both her knees and groaned "Suuuuu!"

"Awright, awright." The redhead said, holding up her hands in surrender. "We found a place to hold the DL meetings."

Hannah wasn't about to let it go that easily "Aaaaaannnnnd?" she asked.

"And what?" Susan asked innocently.

The blond girl rolled her eyes and pointed out, counting on her fingers "One, your lips are all swollen. Two, your shirt isn't butt--" Hannah broke off as she tugged on the unevenly buttoned shirt. She yanked her hand away. Continuing her speech an octave higher, she exclaimed "And where'd your bra go!"

"What!?" Susan gasped, her eyes popping out. She looked down and frowned at the really badly buttoned school shirt. Then, slipped her hand inside and felt around. Red faced, she explained "The ...ahh...clasp got undone. Its there."

"Fancy that." Hannah commented, dryly "Wonder how that happened."

Susan tried to change subjects "So, anyway," she said "Everyone needs to meet on the seventh floor, you have to go all the way--"

"Any lovemarks?" Hannah asked. She reached for Susan's shirt again.

The redhead grabbed a pillow off the bed and hugged it "HANNAH!!" she exclaimed.

"Oh! Come on!" the blond girl shot back "It wouldn't be the first time."

Susan frowned, then said "That was different. We were six!"

"And how about five years in the same dorm?" Hannah persisted. "Consider it part of my Healer training."

Susan shook her head. "You're not interested in being a Healer. You're too into Potions." She said, as she pushed open the curtains.

"Just concerned for my best friend's health." She grumbled.

Susan gave her a funny look and said "Good night, Hannah." She crossed the room and climbed into her bed.

"Everything all right?" Hannah when she saw a light through Susan's curtains twenty minutes later.

Susan's muffled voice came back "Go to sleep, Abbott!"



## 20 – Quidditch and the DL

There was a lot of milling around during breakfast and lunch the next day. Students from different Houses were intermingling on an unprecedented level. At dinner, however, things had quieted down for the most part.

Inquisitor Umbridge was highly suspicious “Something is afoot, Headmaster.” She said.

“I find it rather refreshing.” Madam Bones countered. Agreement between the two top witches at the Ministry wasn’t very common.

Frowning at her rival, Umbridge said “It seems to me that the Potter boy’s special treatment has led to this. The Houses were created to group similar students together. This is not what the Founders had in mind.”

“A careful study of their writings shows that only Salazar Slytherin seemed to have any such inclination.” Madam Bones said, in a lecturing tone. “But, regardless of the Founders’ original ideas, they lived a millennium ago.”

Looking appalled, Umbridge asked “Are you suggesting we toss out everything the four greatest wizards and witches of all time stood for!?”

“Not at all.” Amelia replied, coolly “I am saying that our interpretations of their writings are colored by the time we live in. And, what may have been true twenty generations ago, may not be today.”

Sneeringly, Snape put in “I, too, am much more traditionalist in temperament. I plan to discipline students I believe are crossing House lines too freely.”

“I agree with Madam Bones.” Professor McGonagall said “We should encourage this. In my days, I recall a freer mixing of students which was most beneficial to all. Nor will I accept my students being punished for your opinions Severus.”

Gideon Prewett, a contemporary of Dumbledore's, commented "These things sway back and forth over the years. Generations tend to do the reverse of the previous one. In my parents' time there was even talk, serious talk, of revealing our world to Muggles. It was Brian, here, who led the way in blocking that."

"Gideon, please address me as Albus or Headmaster." Said Dumbledore, impatiently.

Ron's Great-Grandfather smirked at the headmaster and cackled "You don't see me adding names every time I see a new wrinkle. And you should remember which of us is older. --Brian--"

"I find myself in complete agreement with Professor Snape." Lucius ground out. "I also find this casual use of familiar names distasteful. In private is one thing, in public children must be presented with a proper level of formality. It would go a long way toward them learning proper impulse control."

Gideon laughed quite loudly and said "Such as casting hexes on people who so richly deserve it."

"I find discipline rather loose here. Particularly with members of certain Houses." Lucius said. He was directing a cold stare at Professor McGonagall.

The Head of Gryffindor didn't flinch, replying with as harsh a look "My understanding was that the group Madam Bones assembled was here to advise and offer suggestions. Not interfere with the day to day running of Hogwarts."

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"I'd give my left nut to know what they're saying up there." Neville Longbottom said.

Luna, sporting a pair of neon green glasses that had one pink and one blue lens, tilted her head and said "That is much too big a sacrifice, dear."

"I think the two of us should have a chat." Xenophilis Lovegood said.

It had been Neville's misfortune that Luna's father had finished dinner and chosen that moment to visit with his daughter. He gulped as if he was trying to swallow an orange whole and said "Yes, sir."

"Nice knowing you, Longbottom!" Michael Corner taunted from a couple of seats away. Several Ravenclaw boys laughed loudly.

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Later that night, in ones and twos, kids from the meeting at the Hogs Head made their way to the seventh floor. They were all gathered in a remote corridor. Hermione, or Daphne Greengrass, checked their names off as they arrived. Fifteen minutes after the appointed time, Harry waved his wand and the doors closed.

Dobby's 'Come and Go' room, which previously had been small with two couches, was now half the size of the Great Hall. It came equipped with sufficient chairs for everyone. Seven people hadn't shown up, those chairs vanished.

"Err...Hi...ummm...everyone." Harry said, haltingly. "Right...I've thought about this and one of the best things I did with Maze last year was practice dodging curses."

Zacharias Smith, one of the major doubters of the group, gave a derisive laugh and said "What good's all that dancing for. I'm good with portego."

"Alright, Smith!" Harry snapped and pulled his wand. "I'm a bad guy! Defend yourself!"

The Ravenclaw went into his robes and had just enough time to get his wand pointed when he was hit.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry fired and a blue bolt hit Smith. The wand clattered on the floor.

"That wasn't fair!" he complained, shaking his hand.

Harry nodded a little guiltily "I know." He said. "I'm sorry."

"Death Eaters don't play fair!" Susan fumed. "Remember Cedric!"

Harry patted her shoulder and said "Calm down. Now, does everyone remember that duel between me and Malfoy?"

"Knocked him on his arse!" Ron chortled.

"I did, didn't I." Harry smirked "But, I've been thinking about that, too. And I was pretty stupid. I let myself get hit."

Hermione shook her head "No you didn't. He cheated. Malfoy fired before Professor Lockhart counted three."

"That's the point, Granger." said Daphne Greengrass. "Potter's right. As soon as Professor Snape pulled Malfoy on the stage I knew what he'd do. He should've seen it coming. Both of you were pathetic."

"HEY THERE!" Ron bellowed

Harry restrained him and asked "We were Second Years, then. What would you have done?"

"Malfoy should've stunned you as soon as you were down. But he gloated and strutted around like a ponce." She replied, much to Ron's amusement. The Slytherin girl glared at him and added "And you Gryffindors are too soft for your own good. Some silly don't hit a man when he's down thing, I'm sure. There's something else, too, but I'll keep it to myself for now."

"Still think you're bragging." Zacharias muttered.

Half the people in the room looked at the Ravenclaw, the other half looked at Harry.

"OK." Harry said. "Let's duel. Fair and square. Just like in second year. Minor spells only."

Hermione looked doubtful “I don’t know about this, Harry.” She complained.

“You said it yourself. We need practical experience.” Susan said.

“You count us off, Hermione.” Harry ordered. Zacharias was taller and bulkier than Harry. So Harry was forced to look up.

Hermione sighed, defeatedly “Fine...everyone else, clear the floor and get the chairs out of the way.” When that was done she said “Right. By the book. Face me...Bow!” The opponents obeyed. “Face each other...Bow!” They did so. “Back to back! When I reach ten you are free to attack! 1...2....3...4....5....

“Tarantellegra!” Zac bellowed as he heard the ten count. Harry simply wasn’t there. His spell hit the wall and produced a puff of smoke. He was highly annoyed when Harry hadn’t fired back. So he fired again. This time, two spells in rapid succession and aimed at his legs.

Harry jumped over both incoming shots and yelled “Rictusempra!” It rebounded off Zac’s shield. This was where Harry proved his point. The Ravenclaw depended on his shield and Harry bombarded it.

The relatively weak spells coming from Harry battered Zac. Finally, on the fifth impact, his shield dissolved. Enough of the boil hex got through to produce three small boils. He’d put out so much effort that he was exhausted, “I... couldn’t... hold it.” He panted.

“Alright, Smith?” asked Harry. His hair was mussed and his tie was out of place. But that was it. The Ravenclaw nodded. But he persisted “You sure?”

Zac snapped “Fine!”

“That was awesome, Harry!” Dean Thomas praised

Harry blushed as the rest of the room clapped “Ok everyone. We should all have a go...I guess...What say we pair off. And remember, nothing too heavy. Boil hexes, tripping jinxes...things like that.” The uneven number of people left Harry partnerless. So, he found himself

wandering around. At first it was rather aimless. But, then he started paying attention to people's actions and pointing out their mistakes

"Bloo--" Neville half cursed, then changed to "Rats!" as Luna's curse hit his shoulder.

Harry had been watching them and walked over. "You had a clear shot when she was half turned. You could've tripped her. Why didn't you take it?" he asked.

"It wouldn't have been fair!" Neville replied angrily.

Harry shook his head, bemused "I think its because she's your girlfriend, mate." He said. "She didn't hesitate when you juggled your wand."

"What would you have done if it had been Susan?" Neville asked. Now he was annoyed with Harry.

At first, Harry glared at his friend. But, as he thought about it, he realized "Probably the same thing you did."

"HAHAHA!" Neville guffawed.

And Harry joined in. He shoved Neville's shoulder and said "Just try to imagine she's Snape trying to hex you."

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"Expurgis! Expemkee!" Cho Chang was doing an awful job not calling out the spell correctly. "Ooops! Sorry!" Apparently one of them was close enough to a fire spell, because her partner's sleeve caught fire.

Harry rushed over "Are you alright?" he said to the curly-haired girl.

"Fine!" she snapped, looking at Harry as if it was his fault.

Harry held up a hand and backed away "You need to relax, Cho." He said. "You're good--"

“Really?” the Chinese girl asked, sarcastically.

Harry scratched his head, sheepishly and said “Well, that was pretty bad. But you need to hold your wand a little looser.” He grabbed her hand and repositioned her fingers. “There, that way you can wave it better, but not drop it.”

“Thanks, Harry.” She said with a wide smile. “Don’t worry about Marietta. I kind of dragged her here. Her parents think Umbridge’s ideas are right.”

Harry frowned and said “You mean torturing kids and trying to throw them in Azkaban?”

“My father said we should oppose her in every way. Especially since she isn’t a teacher!” Luna declared proudly. “He doesn’t want her here! EEEEEKK!!”

Neville came rushing over apologizing “Oh, Merlin! Luna, I’m sooooo sorry!” His spell, a weak version of the Bludgeoning Curse, had hit the blond girl right across the nose and it was bleeding

“We have to get her to Madam Pomfrey!” Hermione shouted.

Thanks to growing up with the Dursleys, Harry knew how to deal with injuries. He pinched Luna’s nose and forced her head back “Cold...need cold...need ice...” he muttered to himself. He would’ve slapped his forehead, but he was busy holding Luna up with one arm and pinching her nose with his other hand. He yelled for his girlfriend “Sue!”

“What’s this?” she asked. There was a hint of anger in her voice.

Harry was focused on Luna “She’s bleeding.” He said “Can you do that freeze thing you did with Malfoy? Put your hand over mine.”

“Oh! Sure!” she said. Her expression instantly cleared.

All the activity in the room had stopped. Neville looked the most concerned. “So much blood!” he moaned.

“My node izz frode.” Said Luna after Harry helped her lean forward again.

The room burst with laughter. Partly from the way she was talking, and partly from relief that the sudden crisis was over.

“You might be a little dizzy.” Harry said.

“Nothing new, there.” The sarcastic remark came from Cho’s friend.

Harry glared at her and said “Shut up! Can someone bring a chair?”

“Here, Luna!” Neville said, breathlessly, having rushed over. As Harry let go, he gently guided his girlfriend into the seat. “Luna, I am soooooo sorrrry. Please forgive me.” Neville apologized again.

She patted his shoulder and said “I fine, Nevie. Just a l-l-little c-c-old. A-a h-h-ug m-might b-bb-e n-nice.”

“Well, ain’t that a happy ending.” Daphne Greengrass grumbled. “Unless you have a way to get us back to our dorms, we’d better end this and go. It’s almost curfew.”

Most of the room complained at that. Harry agreed with her “No...Daphne’s right.” He said. Then he consulted his Marauders’ Map and announced “Right, there’s no teachers up here. So just like we got here, head back to your dorms in small groups.”

“How do you know that, Potter?” the Slytherin girl asked. She was clearly trying to see what Harry was looking at.

Harry folded the map into his pocket and smirked “You got your secrets. I got mine.”

The same time, the following week was agreed upon. Hermione also announced “Daphne and I will have the charter ready by then. So, this is your last chance to back out.”



Soon enough, the room was empty. Only five were left. Hannah was concerned “You’ll never be able to avoid getting caught.” She fussed “We’re all Prefects so we’re fine. You’ll get detention for sure.”

“Harry has--” Ron started.

Harry elbowed him sharply and said “His own tricks. Something even the famous Weasley Twins lack. Don’t worry, Hannah, we won’t be caught.”

“We’ll be fine.” Susan said, distractedly.

Doubtful, but unable to argue. It kept getting later. It was now twenty minutes past curfew. Hannah said “Alright. I guess. But, please, Sue, be back before I get through patrolling.” Then she departed with Ron and Hermione.

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“What’s wrong?” Harry asked, as soon as they were gone.

Not able to meet his gaze, Susan replied “Nothing.”

“Come on.” He urged “You’ve been quiet the entire time we were letting people out. You even kinda blew off Hannah.”

Susan made an unpleasant noise and asked “When did you get so smart?”

Harry didn’t have an answer, so he tugged on her robes.

“I’m angry, Harry.” She said, resisting his pull.

Harry blinked in surprise. It was a rare thing for Susan. The only thing that he could think of was to say “Sorry.”

“I’m not angry at you, Harry. I’m angry at me.” She replied.

That didn't help Harry at all. "So, apologize to yourself and forget it." He replied. It sounded like something the twins might say. But it made sense. Sort of.

"That's silly!" she sniggered.

He laughed for a moment and asked "So?"

"Right." She began reluctantly. "First, I want you to know I thought you were amazing tonight."

Harry blushed "Thanks, but--"

"Let me finish." She said "I reacted jealously tonight. Twice."

Confused, Harry asked "Why? When?"

"I misread both times so badly." She said "The first time was with Cho."

"I was helping her with how to hold her wand. She was holding it too tight." He said.

Nodding, she replied "Yeah...I know. And then, just for a moment, I thought you were hugging Luna."

"She's with Neville." Harry pointed out. "And, besides--"

Susan touched his lips to silence him and said "Besides, you were helping her because she was hurt. I got that when I saw all the blood. You knew exactly what to do."

"Lots of practice." Harry said, dismissively. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it tightly. With an intense look he added "You're my girlfriend. Not Cho, or Luna, or Hermione or--"

If anything, Susan was more embarrassed than before "I'm sorry, Harry. I was being stupid." She said, averting her eyes.

"I think I understand. I felt the same thing, I think, when I saw you walking with Justin right before that big fight." He admitted. "You seemed ...well ... friendly."

"How come you didn't say something before now?" she asked.

Harry could only scratch his head, he replied "Eh...forgot about it until now."

"We have been through a lot considering how long we've been together, haven't we?" asked Susan, rhetorically. She leaned into his chest.

Harry nodded and rested his arms on her shoulders "Yeah, and I slept through half of it." He joked.

"Not funny." She protested weakly.

Harry snorted in amusement and asked "So, does this count as our first real fight?"

"Don't know. Maybe. Why?" she frowned, slightly and looked up.

He kissed her cheek and said "After watching Ron and Hermione, I think they fight just so they can make up."

"Hmmmm." Susan hummed. Then, after 'making up' for she wasn't quite sure how long, she asked "Now, how are we going to avoid getting caught."

Harry answered her by pulling out a cloak and saying "Now you see me....Now you don't."

"Harry! That's an Invisibility Cloak!" she exclaimed as he vanished. "Hey, where are you?"

Backing away, he moved to the left and said "Over here."

"I suppose you think this is funny." She grumbled.

“Yeah.” he sniggered. He watched her spin around. Then, when her back was turned, he grabbed her from behind and pulled her under the cloak. Playfully, he said “Hi!”

“Hmpf!” she grunted “Sneaking up on poor unsuspecting girls like that!”

Harry laughed “Oh, come on!” They made it back undetected.

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The first Quidditch game of the season had been Gryffindor vs Slytherin. The attack on Harry and Susan led to a forfeit by Gryffindor as they had no backup. Harry was still in a coma at the time. Angelina Johnson had been devastated. She swore up and down it would never happen again. The team needed backups for every position.

Ravenclaw had beaten Hufflepuff in the second game mostly because Cho was a far more experienced Seeker than Ben. It was the Third Year boy’s first real game. The score there was 340-220.

Winter arrived early for the mid-November game between Hufflepuff and Slytherin. The temperature was below freezing and it was snowing lightly. Just after breakfast, the stadium began filling with students. Long before the 10:00 start time, the stands were full of students, professors and visitors.

Outside the Hufflepuff tent, Susan was pinned to the wall with Harry leaning against her. They were snogging. She broke a kiss and said “Gonna miss you the next couple of hours.”

“Me too.” He replied, grinning. “Sucks that I can’t sit with you.” Harry was referring to the fact that, because of seating limitations, students had to sit with their Houses.

“Yeah, Merlin forbid you lose your hand-warmers.” Susan teased.

Harry laughed out loud and tweaked her nipple. He was rewarded with her nipping at his neck. “So that’s what they’re for!” He whispered, as if he’d learned something new in class.

“Goof!” she replied, giggling.

After a few minutes they were interrupted by the Hufflepuff Quidditch team emerging “Not spying on us, Potter?” one of the Chasers asked, suspiciously.

“Came to wish you luck, actually.” Said Harry. He ignored the accusation and addressed himself to Hufflepuff’s Seeker. They’d been out flying several times since Harry’s semi-inclusion in Susan’s House. “What about it, Cadwallader, think you can beat Malfoy?” he asked.

Looking doubtful, Ben replied “I’ll do my best.”

“Think a Firebolt might help?” he asked with a grin and tossed his broom at the befuddled boy.

Awed, Ben just stood there, mouth hanging open.

“Firebolts are rubbish.” said Draco as the Slytherin team marched by “2001s are far superior. Your little pet Hufflepuff doesn’t stand a chance against me, Potter.”

Harry sneered at him “Oh, and how many times have you beaten me to the Snitch, Malfoy?”

“Get in my way and I’ll hurt you, midget.” Draco threatened.

The tense scene was interrupted by the arrival of Professor Sprout, who said “Mr. Malfoy, I believe you have somewhere to be. And that will be twenty points from Slytherin for your remarks. Mr. Potter, I overheard your kind offer. It was most generous. Fifty points will be awarded to Gryffindor.”

“Thanks Professor.” Harry said with a happy grin. His pleasure was further enhanced by watching Draco storm off. “Good luck to you, too, Draco!” he called out sarcastically.

The Head of Hufflepuff smiled sneakily and added "Very noble, Harry. Have another five points."

"Err...thanks" he stuttered "But...I really--"

Interrupting him, she said "I know you are not going to argue with me awarding points, Mr. Potter. Now, off you go. Don't want to miss the beginning of the match, do you?"

"Yes, ma'am, thank you." He replied hurriedly. And, aware of both the team's and the professor's presence, he pecked Susan on the lips and departed.

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Holding the girl back, Pomona said "Suzy, as your professor, as long as you are discrete your romantic affairs are your business. But, and I say this as your aunt's friend, that looked a bit more than casual kissing to me."

"How much did you see?" asked Susan, a definite blush colored her cheeks.

"Remember that I am married and quite used to having romantic moments interrupted, so I can easily recognize hands being withdrawn from under robes. If you catch my meaning." She replied.

Fighting with her blush, Susan said "Harry's never done anything I haven't wanted him to."

"You two were pushed together rather abruptly. I'm merely saying, boys tend to--"

In moments like these, where it wasn't a student-teacher talk, Susan was more blunt with her Head of House "Now you're sounding like Dad." She grumbled.

"Your father is just concerned for your wellbeing." Pomona replied. Though she'd criticized Neil Bones to her friend, she wouldn't do so in Susan's presence. "I trust you are still writing to your father."

Emitting a frustrated noise, the teenager replied "Of course I am, Pom Pom. But, like Granny Malfoy said, he's seeing a bit of my inner snake."

"Just don't be too hard on him." Pomona cautioned "And, easy on the Pom Pom. Get me!"

Susan giggled and said "Yes Pom Pom."

"Oh get out of my sight!" Pomona retorted "And remember what'll happen if I hear that from anyone else!"

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While Susan was able to get to her spot in the Hufflepuff section fairly easily, Harry had to make his way to the opposite side of the stadium to get to the Gryffindor section. Only about half of Harry's House turned out for the match. Neville Longbottom wasn't there, for one. None of the Seventh Years, except for Fred and George, showed. Seamus and Ginny weren't around. 'No loss there' Harry thought. Oliver Wood insisted all team members come to all the other games, so they could watch the other Houses play. So, of course, Ron was there. Harry slapped his back and asked "So, no Hermione, huh?"

"Said she was gonna STUDY!" Ron growled "This is important, y'know!"

Harry backed off and said "Easy, mate. She's always here for our games."

"Hmpf!" snorted Ron. "So where you been?"

Harry chuckled sourly and said "This stadium's a lot smaller when you're on a broom. Takes forever."

"Snogging too long, you mean." Ron teased.

Harry laughed and replied "No such thing, Ronnikins."

“Potter! About time you got here!” the sharp voice of Angelina Johnson interrupted. In a condescending tone, he asked “Would you care to explain why your broom is up there?” She hadn’t been happy with Harry’s ‘defection’ Even if it wasn’t a total one.

Harry sighed tiredly, “You know what? I don’t have to explain myself to you. But just so everyone else knows, I loaned it to Ben Cadwallader.”

“It actually might benefit us, if the ‘Puffs win.” Angelina replied, after calculating possible point spreads.

“Also picked up fifty-five House Points for my generosity.” Harry added.

Angelina paid that no mind, shouting “SCORE! That’s Hufflepuff’s lead, 40-20!”

“Thank you Harry. Way to go Harry. That was brilliant Harry.” The-Boy-Who-Lived muttered.

As the day got warmer, the snow turned to a cold rain. The storm got worse, it became a driving rain with severe winds. But, once a match starts, it doesn’t end until the Snitch is caught. After the first hour, Hufflepuff held a slight, but growing lead of 80-50.

At one point, Harry saw a Bludger slicing through the rain on a course directly for Hufflepuff’s Seeker “BENNNN!!” he yelled at the top of his lungs. Harry didn’t know whether he’d heard the warning, or not, but the younger boy suddenly moved.

Half-way into the third hour, Goyle whacked a Bludger and it clipped the shoulder of Hufflepuff’s goalie. The girl tumbled out of control for a moment, but recovered. She continued playing, but the injury slowed her and the tide of the game turned. Slytherin scored much more frequently. The rain slowed to a drizzle, making scoring even easier, as the Chasers could more easily hold onto the Quaffle.

Harry had his binoculars trained on Susan when she booed. That was the moment Slytherin took the lead.



The Hufflepuff goalie seemed to have recovered as the fifth hour began. But, the damage had been done. Slytherin had a commanding lead of 240-140. The rain, which had subsided, suddenly intensified again.

Harry, who had been searching for the Snitch, spotted it as Hufflepuff scored their first goal in ten minutes. Frantically, he searched for Ben. He saw Malfoy, who was coasting lazily at the opposite end of the pitch. The Slytherin bent forward and his broom shot forward, climbing toward the Snitch. He finally found Hufflepuff's Seeker, almost directly below the golden ball.

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'What're you doing Malfoy?' Ben asked himself. Like Harry showed him, he studied the angle of his opponent's flight. The Slytherin was going up at a fairly steep rate, so Ben stopped circling and went straight up. He was completely focused on the Snitch, so much so, that he didn't see Draco abruptly drop back.

The Snitch had changed direction and was now zig-zagging toward the Hufflepuff rings.

Malfoy was now in the lead, so Ben leaned even more forward on Harry's broom. It roared with acceleration and soon, they were neck and neck. Draco had greater reach than the Hufflepuff and his fingers could feel the tickle of the gold wings. He looked back and smirked at his opponent.

"No bloody way, Malfoy!" Ben hissed. He leaned forward until he almost fell off the broom. The extra little burst of speed was enough to pass Draco and snag the Snitch right out of his grip. "UN-BLOODY-BELIEVABLE!!" Ben yelled triumphantly "THAT'LL TEACH YOU!!" His hand went up and he shook his fist.

Draco was furious! He'd been beaten by a miserable Third Year! They were still hurtling directly for the Hufflepuff goal rings. He gave the twerp a push, then veered off himself.

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The entire stadium, cheering the brilliant catch by the current youngest Seeker, fell silent as the crash happened. Harry's Firebolt splintered on impact, littering the pitch. Ben Cadwallader's body collided with the middle ring face first. After wrapping around the ring, Ben fell.

The only one to move was the Headmaster. A blue spell leapt from Dumbledore's wand as the crash happened. He stuck the boy to the ring post, preventing a fatal fall. Dumbledore disappeared from his seat in the VIP Box and reappeared, standing on nothing, by the injured boy. He took a moment to lift Ben into his arms, then disappeared again

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--a late hit, Madam Hooch!!" Hufflepuff's captain roared.

The referee nodded sympathetically "I understand that, but the rules of the game say Once the Snitch is caught, the game is over. There is nothing I can do."

"Malfoy should be thrown off the team!" Harry fumed. He and the Gryffindor team had just arrived.

Madam Hooch glared at him "This is not your business, Potter." She said.

"You may not be able to punish him as a player, Madam Hooch. But as a Professor, I most certainly can address Mr. Malfoy's actions!" said Professor Sprout, harshly. "I will have fifty points from Slytherin for your unsportsmanlike conduct."

Draco's jaw dropped "I didn't do anything wrong, Professor!" he protested.

"Silence! I wasn't finished!" she snapped "We can only hope Professor Dumbledore's fast response prevented serious injury to Mr.

Cadwallader! I am taking an additional one hundred points from Slytherin for what you did--”

“But!--“

Despite being a head shorter than Draco, Professor Sprout’s glare silenced him “And, finally, you will report to Madam Pomfrey every day during your free period and after supper, until Mr. Cadwallader is fully recovered and released. Perhaps cleaning bedpans will change your attitude. I suggest you clear your social calendar. Your weekends will be spent there all day.”

Draco just stood there mutely.

“Haha! That’s great!” Harry laughed. “The trash taking out the trash!”

Draco spun on him angrily and reached for his wand, but Harry was faster. Draco stopped and snorted at it “Hmpf! Sorry about the broom, Potter. Here’s a Galleon, that should cover it.” He said.

“Fuck you, Malfoy!” Harry snarled. He slapped the coin away in disgust and, forgetting his wand, punched Draco in the mouth. When Crabbe and Goyle tried to jump him, Fred and George defended Harry.

This was the scene that Professor McGonagall and Inquisitor Umbridge came upon. “Potter! Release Mr. Malfoy at once!” the Head of Gryffindor said, imperiously. “And you four; (referring to the Weasley twins, Crabbe and Goyle) Break it up at once!”

“He nearly murdered Cadwallader, Professor!” Harry growled. He tightened his grip on Draco’s robes.

Minerva pointed her wand at Harry and said “Potter! It is not up to you to dish out punishments! Now, let go!” Surprisingly, she followed up with “Please.”

“Fine” he grumbled, letting the bloodied Draco fall to the grass.

Draco spit blood at Harry and stormed off, taking Crabbe and Goyle with him.

“Potter, do not misunderstand this for approval, but I sympathize with your feelings.” McGonagall said, “Nevertheless, you will serve detention for the next two weeks with--”

Inquisitor Umbridge interrupted “Hem hem!”

“AS I was saying, Potter.”

“HEM! HEM!” came the coughing again.

McGonagall turned around sharply and asked “What?!”

“I find your punishments inadequate, Minerva.” Umbridge said, coolly.

McGonagall drew herself up in a cold fury “And I find your opinions irrelevant, Delores!” she snapped back.

“Well, fortunately for the future of Hogwarts, Minister Fudge does not.” The Inquisitor replied “I will spare you a reading. You may do so at your leisure. But, in essence, this latest decree--”

“ANOTHER ONE!!” came from a number of disgruntled voices.

Continuing as if it didn’t happened Umbridge said “This latest decree, permits the High Inquisitor, namely myself, to exercise supreme authority over all punishments imposed by staff on students. I may modify them at my discretion. Mr. Potter will serve detention with me, personally, for the next two weeks.”

“No!” Harry snapped.

She blinked at him in shock “I -- beg your --pardon. Do you realize who I am?”

“My friend Hermione said it best in court.” Harry shot back. He was going to mention Susan’s outburst that ended in her removal as Defense professor.

But, she walked up at that moment, with her aunt. "Hey. Good news. Ben will be back in class Monday." Susan announced. It took her a second to realize she was being ignored and pick up on the tension.

"Miss Granger's defiance of authority is another matter entirely." Umbridge said, coldly. "Very well, Mr. Potter, you leave me one other outlet. Your permission to play Quidditch is hereby revoked. It's that or serve your detention."

Angelina Johnson urged "Do the detention. What's the big deal?"

"Professor?" asked Harry. He was glaring at his team captain.

McGonagall felt stymied in the face of the latest Educational Decree "I do not know, Potter." She said "I have never run into something like this before. But I will be speaking to Professor Dumbledore about the matter."

"Fine." Harry said, defeatedly. Taking it to mean nothing would be done. It was another blow to his sinking respect for his Head of House. He gave her a bitter look and said "Nothing's worth sitting with this hag. I quit."

The Inquisitor, who would've been satisfied either way, gave a sappy grin and said "On to other matters."

"You're a selfish little sod, Potter." Said Angelina, standing in his way.

Harry didn't even acknowledge her. He walked right into her, knocked her over, and kept going. Harry left stunned silence in his wake.

"Misbegotten brat." Umbridge said. "Now, to continue. Pomona, I find your punishment of young Mr. Malfoy entirely too harsh. I am reinstating the points you deducted from Slytherin. Further, it is utterly unacceptable to have the scion of one of our noblest pureblood families scrubbing bedpans like an ordinary House-elf. Mr. Malfoy may sit his detentions in my office." That said, she smiled brightly and headed for the castle.

Professor Sprout glared at her departing back and pulled her wand.

“Pomona! That would solve nothing!” Minerva hissed, restraining her colleague.

The Head of Hufflepuff wrenched herself free, returned her wand to her robes and said “No, but it would’ve made me feel better.”

“Professor... we... that is...me, Fred and George...have been talking...” Ron said hesitantly.

“DO you really feel this is the time, Mr. Weasley?” asked McGonagall, sharply.

Ron gulped, nervously and said “After what Angelina said to Harry, we don’t want her as captain anymore.”

“What!” the black girl snapped.

“We will discuss that later, Mr. Weasley.” McGonagall said.

“We’re serious, Professor.” Fred said.

George grinned at his twin “Quite serious.” He added in support. “Professor, if Johnson stays as captain, we’ll all resign.”

“I will discuss this with the entire team, later.” Replied the Head of Gryffindor. She hid her shock behind her sternest Professor expression.

Watching the trio of redheads depart, her tone lightly sarcastic, Sprout asked “Weasleys giving up Quidditch. Should we tell Albus we think Harry has them under the Imperius Curse?”

“Not helpful, Pomona, not helpful at all.” Minerva replied irritably.

“I apologize, Minerva.” She replied. “But, in all sincerity, if you want to heal some of the rifts in your House. I’d suggest starting with your own relationship with young Mr. Potter.”

“Pomona, I was here as a student with Tom Riddle.” She confided “I was a Second Year. Then Head Boy Riddle caught me out after curfew and dressed me down. The way Potter looked at me, just now, made me feel like that little girl.”

Laughing sarcastically, Pomona asked “Frightened of your own student?”

“Not helpful, Pomona, not helpful at all.” Minerva replied for the second time in the conversation.

Unaffected by a glare that had crushed her in her student days, she replied “Alright, Minvera, there’s only one adult here that I’m sure Harry willingly talks to. See how much Amelia Bones is willing to tell you .”

“Did she tell you what they discussed?” asked McGonagall, curiously.

Sprout turned cold, saying “Ami has been my closest friend for forty years. I will not betray her confidences.”

“I didn’t intend that you should.” McGonagall apologized.

To which Sprout nodded curtly.

They returned to Hogwarts in an uncomfortable silence, then went their separate ways.

## 21 – A Difficult December

Harry greeted December 1st alone in the olwery. Hagrid's return, which he had welcomed enthusiastically, was spoiled by a couple of things. First, was Umbridge's ruthless 'evaluation' of Hagrid as a teacher. This was softened somewhat by Madam Bones' own visit a few days later. The second reason was more personal. Hagrid still spoke worshipfully of the Headmaster. Harry knew why that was. He even understood it. But he no longer felt the same way about Dumbledore.

"Hoooo!" Hedwig whistled sympathetically. She nuzzled Harry's knee. Owls didn't understand everything humans said, but they were smarter than humans gave them credit for.

Harry patted her head, softly "Thanks, Hedwig." He said. "You'll always be my first girl." He laughed when the owl puffed up. "Now, take this to Sirius."

"Hoo! Hooo! HoHooooHoo!" Hedwig whistled in acknowledgement. She took the letter from Harry and shot off into the sky.

Harry gave a melancholy sigh as he watched her soar. He hadn't been on a broom since the Hufflepuff/Slytherin match. On recovering, Ben Cadwallader had rushed to him and apologized profusely, promising to repay him, somehow. Harry, knowing just how rich he was, and not wanting Ben to worry, told the young Seeker that it wasn't his fault. That Draco Malfoy was to blame.

More than anything else, not being able to play Quidditch had brought Harry here today. Inquisitor Umbridge had ruled that Harry would never play Quidditch again. He was especially miserable, as today was the Gryffindor match against Hufflepuff. Early on in helping Ben learn to play Seeker, Harry realized that sooner or later, they'd be flying against each other. A memory flashed through his mind.

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"Just, y'know, don't teach him everything you know, mate." Ron had said.



Hermione scowled at her boyfriend and said "That's not very sporting."

"Dunno 'bout that." Harry replied "It'd give me an edge." Harry remembered watching very predictable reactions spread across his best friends' faces. He laughed out loud, earning the same glare from both of them.

"It isn't funny, Harry." Hermione had scolded him.

Laughing more, Harry replied "Sure it is. Way to go, Ron! Very Slytherin of you!"

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Harry's good humor faded as quickly as it had come on. He had gone on to show Ben as much as he could. Harry especially wanted to see him beat Malfoy. But, even he didn't expect it to happen on the first try. Today's match would've been brilliant. Threatened with a boycott, McGonagall had removed Angelina as captain, but hadn't named a new one. Sitting in the stands, watching Gryffindor play, was too painful for Harry. To add insult to injury, Ginny Weasley had replaced Harry as Gryffindor's Seeker. How could he be expected to watch that?

"Hoo, hooohooooohoo. Hoo Hoo." A newly arrived owl said as he landed near Harry. He studied Harry intently then extended his leg.

Harry blinked in surprise and asked "You have something for me?"

"Hoo hoooo, hooo! Hooooo, hooohoo!!" the owl screeched and flapped his wings.

Harry got the message "Ok...ok stupid question." He replied, feeling rather embarrassed.

"Hoooooooo!" the owl said as he rolled his eyes.

"Thanks." Harry said, politely "Here's some treats for you."

We Brought Light to the Dark Ages! The seal on the back proclaimed.

Kinnison THE Butterbeer of the Emerald Isle The letterhead said.

The letter was a very kind invitation for the Christmas holidays and was signed by both of Susan's parents.

"Well, you just gonna sit there like a lump?" asked a lightly scornful voice from below.

Harry looked down and smiled. It was Susan. "Hey." He greeted her "How'd you know where to find me?"

"I followed Kinnexo, of course." She replied

Harry rolled off the beam he was sitting on and floated down to stand in front of her. With a confused look he asked "Who?"

"The owl, silly." Explained Susan with a laugh "All of Dad's company's owls are like that. Kinnexo, Kinnexa, Kinnemma, Kinnasha--"

Harry interrupted her "Ok, ok, I get the idea. So is the game over?"

"Yeah. Hufflepuff won. Ben caught the Snitch." She reported "He was on his forth victory lap when I left."

Harry's laugh was bittersweet "Heh, that's great. You're not celebrating the win?"

"Come on, Harry." She complained "I couldn't really enjoy myself knowing you were off somewhere feeling lousy. So, feel better?"

Harry stepped closer, rested his hands on her hips and said "Yeah, now that you're here."

"Harry! I'm ice cold! It's freezing out there!" she exclaimed.

He just barely brushed his lips over hers and whispered "Warm in here."

"We are not snogging in an owlery." She said firmly.

(kiss) "No?" he asked (kiss)

"Absolutely (kiss) Not!" replied Susan "I DON'T want to be crapped on." (kiiiiisss) "Mmmmmm, come on Harry." She moaned, managing to pull away. "Look, let's eat dinner, then we can sneak off."

Harry grinned and replied "Works for me. Room of Requirement, half past seven."

"What is it with you and that ruddy room?" she complained, playfully. "Broom closets are closer. What's wrong with them?"

Harry's face changed abruptly "NO!" he snapped, harshly.

"Fine!" Susan shot back. She yanked her hand away from Harry and started for the castle.

Harry heard a sob and he felt like his guts just spilled into the snow. He ran after her, calling "Susan! Stop, please!"

"Let go, Harry!" she demanded when he caught her arm.

He did so and said "Look...Sue...I'm really sorry for popping off like that. I didn't mean it the way it sounded. It's just...I...uhh...don't like small spaces."

"That's it?" she asked, coldly. "You bit my head off because you don't like small spaces? Hmpf!"

Harry's shoulders slumped as she walked around him and kept going. "F--stupid, bloody, idiot!" he berated himself.

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A couple of hours later, sitting in a corner of the Gryffindor Common room, Harry had just finished talking.

“What got into you!?” an appalled Hermione exclaimed after Harry told the story.

Harry glared at her for a moment, but knew she was right. “I know, I know.” He muttered miserably.

“You’re gonna hafta tell’er about those Muggles of yours, mate.” Said Ron.

Hermione gazed at him in surprise. “That was...spot on...Ronald.” She praised. Then back to Harry, “Ron’s right, Harry.”

“But it’s embarrassing!” he growled at her. “I don’t like even you guys knowing.”

“Little late for that, mate. After the whole pensieve thing.” Said Ron, reminding him of the memories he made them share.

Harry looked a little guilty.

Hermione waved it off. “We don’t need you to apologize. You were right. We needed a good kick.” She said.

“Ok...” Harry sighed. He stood up to go in search of Susan, bumped into someone and said “Excuse me.” Then went on his way.

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Looking at her ex-boyfriend’s retreating back, Ginny Weasley grumbled “Nicest thing he’s said to me in months and he didn’t even look at me.”

“He had a bad day. Might’ve had something to do with Quidditch.” Said Ron, gruffly. He and Ginny still hadn’t come close to reconciling. “Wha’d’you want?”

Ginny sighed “Right now, to find out if there’s a way we can join that thing you guys started. But, really, Ron, what’s it gonna take?”

“How about you--” Ron began, angrily.

Hermione cut him off "Later, Ron. Alright Ginny. First thing, no Seamus."

"You tell that--" Ginny started.

Hermione snapped "I am not an ow-ww! Harry refuses to even talk to you until he knows you weren't involved in the Hogsmeade attack. And as for Seamus--"

"That's obvious, he's jealous." Ginny concluded.

Hermione rolled her eyes "I'm not even going to reply to that." She said impatiently "Now, no Seamus. Take it or leave it."

"What else?" asked Ginny.

"The least illegal thing we could agree to is to question you under Veratiserum." Said Hermione.

Ginny's eyebrows nearly left her head at that "What else was suggested?" she asked.

"Never mind. But, if you fail, we'll report it to Madam Bones." Hermione said, bluntly.

Ginny flinched at the ruthlessness Hermione was displaying. She turned to Ron and said "You're my brother, Ron. You can't honestly believe I had something to do with that. Can you?"

"You just changed so much, Gin." Ron answered, not directly answering her question. "I...I...well I...wouldn't mind knowing...y'know...for sure."

Ginny sniffled a little and said "That hurts, Ron. He was the one cheating on me."

Ron, who had patted her shoulder when she sniffled, yanked it away when she finished. "That's what you got in your head, somehow!" he gritted out between clenched teeth. "Bloody stupid Prophet!"

“Ron, watch your mouth!” Hermione scolded him. “Assuming you pass, Ginny, there’s one last thing.”

Ginny’s eyes narrowed “There’s more?!” she asked, angrily.

“I solemnly swear Umbitch has delusions of god-hood” said Ron, holding his wand to a piece of parchment. You could tell by his grin he was quite happy saying that. He handed it to his sister.

Hermione rolled her eyes and complained “I’m not sure who’s worse, the twins or Susan.”

“Defense League Charter...” Ginny read

We, the undersigned, do hereby agree as follows

1. Acknowledge Harry Potter as the leader of the group. And, during meetings, defer to him as if he were a Professor.

- -a. As a condition to the above, Harry Potter agrees to treat ALL members of the group fairly. This is regardless of personal opinion, family or House affiliation.

2. To keep the group secret from any non-group member. This includes Professors, Ministry officials, family members, friends and Housemates.

- -a. An exception to this is the inclusion of a new member

3. A new member must be approved by majority vote, including Harry Potter; or a two-thirds vote without him.

4. All group members will be notified at least two days in advance of a meeting.

- -a. Meetings will be held in -- Unless discovered, or a better place is found.

- -b. Magic taught will be both defensive and offensive in nature.

- -c. It MAY BE used to assist in classwork and improve grades, or your skills generally.

5. It MAY NOT be used to attack another member of the group, or to commit any crime.

- -a. An exception to this is practice dueling.

6. A group-member may leave the group, if he/she wishes.

- -a. Said person will return their --

- -b. Said person agrees to maintain the secrecy of the group, as in #2.

- -c. Said person will still be bound by #5.

Authors : Hermione Granger and XXXXXXXXX

Harry Potter Ron Weasley XXXXXXXXXXXX

XXXXXXXXX Hermione Granger XXXXXXXXXXXX

XXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXX

XXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXX

There were thirty-seven signatures, but Ginny could only read three  
“You really thought about this didn’t you?” she commented.

“Thanks.” Hermione replied, brightly.

Curious, Ginny asked “Who’s the other writer? And why are things blocked out?”

“Only members can see them.” The bushy-haired girl replied.

Making a decision, Ginny reached for a quill, but Ron snatched the charter away from her “After the Veratiserum.” He told her.

"Thought family stuck together." Ginny growled

Ron fired back "Harry is family! You and Mum have forgotten that!"

"Ron, please!" Hermione urged.

Ron gave her an angry look and said "For once, Hermione, butt out!"

"Fine! But don't blame me when McGonagall gives you both detention!" she snarled, then she gathered her books and stormed away. She ran up the Girls' stairs, leaving the siblings to their 'discussion'.

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While Hermione was abandoning the battling Weasleys, Harry had, after three attempts, finally coaxed Susan out of her dormitory. His pocket was ten Galleons lighter. Susan giggled as the out of breath Second Year took her payment and departed. "Ten Galleons, just to get me here. You probably just paid for next year's books." Susan said lightly.

Harry smiled, maybe this wouldn't be so bad. Shrugging, he replied "I'd a paid a hundred if I had to."

"Not bad, Harry. I'm flattered." She said.

"Hem! Hem!" Hannah Abbott coughed, in imitation of their least favorite witch. "Flattery's not gonna cut it, though."

"Take a walk with me...please." Harry asked.

Hannah declared "I'm coming, too."

"Err..." Harry stuttered.

Susan saved him, though "We discussed this, Hannah." She said "I'm a big girl. This is my relationship."



“But, I just--”

Susan flicked her thumb across her throat in a cutting motion and said “Nix!”

“Fine.” Hannah sighed “But, I expect a full report.”

Susan didn’t reply to that, but said “Let’s go, Harry.”

“Have a seat?” Harry offered “This might take a while.” They were in the castle courtyard, which displayed a cloudless night sky. The pair wasn’t cold, thanks to a warming charm that covered the area during winter.

Susan nodded and sat. With anger in her voice, she asked “So, why are we here instead of off somewhere, snogging each other silly?”

“Because I’m a foul git.” Harry offered.

“Not as a general rule.” She said “You’re a nice enough bloke. Nicer than... say... Draco.”

Harry’s face twisted into a grimace, he mumbled “Thanks.”

“No problem.” She replied. A smile graced her face for a moment then faded.

“Right.” Harry said, taking the hint. “Right, I guess you saw a bit of it with Paula Polkiss.” At her quizzical look, he added “Your brother’s girlfriend. My Muggle relatives are some of the worst people. They’re just like Malfoy and Snape with the way they call Hermione names.”

Susan asked “What does that have to do with it?”

“Before I started here, I grew up getting shoved in a cupboard just like those broom closets. I just...can’t...go... in one. Even thinking about them--” he broke off, shivering slightly. His face lost some of its color.

Susan got up and pushed him into her seat. Concerned, she said “Looks like it’s you that needs to sit.”

"Thanks." He said, ashamed of his weakness. "Right... look... Susan, you were definitely right to be mad at me. I shouldn't've taken my problems out on you. I'm sorry."

Susan shrugged one shoulder and half-smiled "I'll survive." She said, then leaning over she kissed his forehead.

"HehHeh!" he giggled, "That tingled!"

Susan gave him a curious look and said "You never reacted like that before."

"You never kissed my scar before." Harry replied "No one ever has."

Grinning, she said "Well, happy to help."

"We're okay, then?" asked Harry.

Susan got between his legs and sat in his lap. She nodded "Let's put it behind us." She said, pressing their lips together. "So, my parents invited you for Christmas, huh?"

"Yeah." he replied. "I'm staying with--" He broke that off. Harry knew Sirius was still an escaped convict. "That is, I'll be at--" Now he didn't know where Sirius' house was.

Susan recognized it and was shocked "Wow!" she exclaimed "That's a Fidelus Charm! Only seen that once!"

The hissing of an angry cat interrupted their conversation.

"Filch's cat! Almost curfew." Harry said "We can talk more in the Common Room."

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Two things that the young couple was unaware of happened during their conversation. The first was quite nearby. Much of their conversation had been spied upon by the one Gryffindor girl who was

nearly as unpopular with Harry as Ginny was. Marion, dormmate of Harry's former girlfriend, had trailed them. Rude certainly, but not necessarily sinister.

Evil was definitely at work in another part of Hogwarts. Severus Snape was grading the infantile work of a Second Year Gryffindor. Why did he have to put up with such drivel?! He had just scored the paper with a D minus when his arm burned. He pulled up his sleeve to see that the Dark Mark was pulsing. He grabbed his cape and swept out of his chambers, muttering "Why can't that fool do something for himself?"

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December abruptly turned mild that year. The snow melted quickly. Harry went to the next Quidditch Match, which was Hufflepuff vs Ravenclaw. The Weasley boys were with the team, now under Katie Bell, so Harry sat between Hermione and Neville. He cheered when Hufflepuff won, but sympathized with a disappointed Luna when he saw her.

The roughly weekly Defense League meetings were the highlights of Harry's nights. The first couple of meetings he had everyone dodging spells. But, when the third meeting protested, he introduced them to the Patronus Charm. Lupin's speech to him from Third Year came in really handy. "No, Colin. The motion is more of a twist than a flick." He said, sounding quite professorly.

"He's really good at this." Susan whispered to Hannah.

Harry heard the whisper, but not the words. He circled around behind her and asked "Problem, Miss Bones?"

"EEP!" she squeaked. Looking around, she gave him a disgruntled face and complained "Don't do that, Harry!"

With challenge in his voice he said "Ex-pect-o Pa-tro-num! Hop to it."

"Expecto Patronum!" Susan cast. Her wand movement was off, but it still emitted a few silver sparks.

He leaned on her shoulder and whispered in her ear “Almost as good as the first one you saw.” Then, he kissed her cheek and walked away. Feeling her glare, he turned his head and winked.

“Frigia!” Susan bellowed, whipping her wand around. The blue spell chilled the air it passed through.

Harry, having purposely provoked her, simply ducked and Susan’s spell shot over his head. Dean Thomas wasn’t so lucky. One of the tallest in the group, the spell aimed at Harry’s head, struck his neck. Which promptly froze, most of the way around. “Hey! Wha-d-i-do?!” the black boy squeaked.

“Easy, Dean.” Said Harry, with a chuckle as he steadied the taller boy. “Who’s good with warming spells?”

The entire group laughed. “That’d be me, Potter.” Said Daphne Greengrass.

“Uhh...” Dean stammered, eyeing the Slytherin girl suspiciously.

“Stay cool.” She shrugged and said. The other Slytherins laughed immediately. Others joined in more slowly.

Dean couldn’t gulp because of the ice on his throat. “Please!” he said.

“All you had to do was ask.” Daphne said. She melted it, but not all that well. She added “Bit chilly, there, Thomas?”

Dean shuddered as the cold water ran under his robes.

“Right, everyone, just a bit of fun.” Harry said, amusedly. “Go ahead, Sue, give it another try.”

She tapped her chin thoughtfully with her wand, closed her eyes and said “Picturing Harry hogtied. Expecto Patronum!” There still wasn’t any real form to it, but the misty spray of silver lasted.

“Good...good.” He said, not overly enthusiastic. But as a professor might. He found Hermione struggling with it and said “Right, first you need to relax. Second, when are you and Ron gonna ease off each other?” This was another thing that was making December difficult for Harry. Their relationship had been a casualty of a brother/sister argument. Hermione hadn’t said a word to Ron since he’d told her to ‘butt out’

Hermione’s eyes narrowed, looking at Ron with open hostility. He wasn’t even looking her way. He was laughing at what she was sure was some stupid comment of that Hufflepuff Quidditch captain’s. And, on top of that, Daphne Greengrass had joined them after thawing Dean’s neck. “That boy is impossible!” she snarled.

“You’ve really hurt him.” Said Harry.

Scowling, she accused “So, you’re on his side.”

“He was arguing with Ginny, Hermione.” He said with a sigh “He wanted you out of the argument. I’m not saying he was right. But, you’re the one who’s acting like he wants you out of his life.”

“I never said that!” she said, crossly.

Harry shook his head sadly and pointed out “No, Hermione. You haven’t said anything to him...for two weeks.”

“You’re right. I think I’ll go sit down for a while. I don’t feel much for Patronus conjuring.” She said “Oh...and Harry...there’s something else... the Veratiserum is ready.”

Harry nodded. Oh well...what was one more thing? He shot off a small fireworks display that got everyone’s attention. “Right, let’s quit a little early.” He said “I’d like everyone to really think about their happy thought. It’s the most important part of powering a Patronus. If you’re not getting anywhere, look for another thought.”

“Homework....”

“...Potter?”

"Tsktsktsk! For shame!" Fred and George exclaimed.

With a mischievous smirk, Harry said "And I think you two can stay after class." That had actually worked out well.

"Yes Professor Potter." George said. He was looking at his shoes. Fred had his thumb in his mouth.

Harry laughed. It was a relief from the seriousness of his talk with Hermione. This topic, of course, wasn't any less serious. He announced "Hermione's finished with the Veratiserum."

"When do you want to do it, then?" asked Ron. He avoided looking at Hermione.

"Now." Harry replied "Plenty of time before curfew."

Ron volunteered "I'll go get her."

"Not here." Said Harry "She doesn't see the Come'n'Go Room until she signs the charter."

All three Weasleys blinked. Ron asked "Mate, don't you trust her? Even a little?"

"Would you, if you were me? I'm only doing this much because you guys asked me to." Harry grumbled "Even so, I'm not gonna take any of her crap. And she better pass this test."

Hermione asked "Can I come with you, Ron?"

"Was someone talking?" Ron asked, bitterly. He glared at Hermione and added "Funny, I don't know the voice!"

Harry looked away. "How about the Astronomy Tower?" George suggested. Everyone found the idea agreeable, so that was where they met twenty minutes later.

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"This is where you meet?" asked Ginny. She sat in one of the stools near a telescope. Professor Sinestra's classroom was full of telescopes and starcharts. Her favorite was the Zodiac, so she always sat near it or at least where she could see it.

"That's not your business...yet." Harry replied. "You gonna take the Veratiserum or not?"

Her head snapped around and Ginny glared at Harry "Making everyone else do this?" she asked, angrily.

"No, just you." He replied in the same tone. "And I'm not forcing you. Leave if you want."

Ginny crossed her arms and grunted "This is blackmail and I'll expect an apology when its over."

"You've got plenty to apologize for, Weasley." Susan shot back. "Don't go dem--"

Hermione interrupted her "Sue, please."

"Shove it up your--"

"GINNY!" Hermione exclaimed. "Right, let's get this over with!"

Still glaring at Susan, Ginny gritted out "Fine."

"Tilt your head back and stick out your tongue." Hermione instructed. Ginny did so. Hermione opened a small bottle with a yellow tinted liquid in it and said "It's rather bitter. Now, one...two...three."

The drops hit Ginny's tongue and she quivered "Vile!" she complained, after swallowing. There was a small ripple of laughter.

"How do we know its working?" asked Harry.

"Easy." Hermione replied "Ginny, lie to me. How old are you?"

Ginny hesitated and then replied "Twenty."

"Give it a minute." The resident genius commented. They waited. "That should do it. Once again. Ginny, what color is your hair?"

"Gr...err...Blue." The redhead replied. Her face contorted into an ugly expression "Rrrr--rrrr--red" was forced out of her.

Harry patted Hermione's back and said "Brilliant!"

"Thanks." Hermione said, smiling and blushing slightly. She unrolled a scroll and asked "First question. Do you remember the Hogsmeade day that Harry and Susan were attacked?"

"Yeth." Ginny replied, slurring her speech.

Hermione checked it off and asked "What did you do that day?"

"Walked-ed round wit Shamas." The dosed girl said. "Den we ated at a inn."

Harry giggled at the way Ginny was speaking. Hermione gave him an annoyed look before continuing "Were you in any way involved in the attack?"

"Uh-uh." She replied, shaking her head. She was a little wild with it, so Fred had to hold her still.

"When did you learn about the attack?" Hermione asked.

Ginny thought before replying "Are-ours ask-kid usss."

"Think she means Aurors, mate." George offered. To which Harry nodded.

"Has anyone, at any time, told you who attacked Harry and Susan?" Hermione asked.

Ginny shook her head "No."



"Ginny, who attacked Harry and Susan?" Hermione asked.

Shrugging, she replied "Dunno, Tom, probly."

"Who the bloody hell is Tom!?" Susan shouted. In a rare fit of anger, she had yanked Ginny off her stool and was shaking the drugged girl.

Ginny swung wildly, missing "Hanz offame, Bunz!" she demanded.

"She means Voldemort, Susan!" said Harry as he pulled his girlfriend off his ex.

Susan had been frozen in shock at hearing the feared name, so she just fell back into Harry's grip.

"This ain't so bad." Harry joked as he supported Susan.

She squeezed the arm that was around her waist and said "Not in front of the twins, they're too young."

"HEY!" Fred exclaimed.

Ron, who had caught Ginny, demanded "What I want to know is why you created this whole mess. You tried to turn everyone against Harry. You almost tore us in half. And the rotten way Harry found out about Finnegan! Tell me why! WHY?"

"A--be--well I..." Ginny stammered for almost a full minute. "The truth is--"

Harry, who had been play wrestling with Susan, glared at Ron and said "Shut up Ginny! Don't answer that!"

"WHY?" shouted Ron. "It was the perfect chance!"

Ginny's head was starting to clear when Harry answered "Because it doesn't matter. What happened; happened. Sue's great and-- well--I don't want to know. It doesn't matter."

"Are you satisfied?" Ginny asked, glaring at Harry.

Not giving an inch, he replied "About the attack, yeah. You're off the hook."

"Not much of an apology for a false accusation." Ginny observed.

"This from the queen of them." Said Susan.

Ginny gave her a baleful look "Mind your own business, Bones!"

"I only agreed to this because of your brothers!" Harry snapped "So don't push it!"

Surprisingly, Ginny backed down and sighed "Fine."

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"Made it!" a breathless Susan sighed, on reaching the Hufflepuff Common Room. "That was close!"

Harry, also a little out of breath, said "We coulda hid under my cloak instead of running."

"And what happens to me every time you get me under that thing?" asked Susan.

Harry's response was a shrug and "Dunno, what?"

"Prat!" she exclaimed, teasingly. "Well, 'night."

A noise, then voices, came from the dorm stairs "Quick!" Harry whispered sharply. In one motion, he whipped out his Invisibility Cloak and whirled it around them. He pulled Susan close to him.

"We're patrolling the first and second floors tonight, Hannah." Said Ernie to his fellow prefect.

Hannah nodded and replied "Got it. -- Hey! Did you just hear something?"

"It's just us." Ernie answered.

Susan had just gotten out "Han--" when Harry silenced her with a kiss.

"See what I mean." She commented, at least ten minutes after the prefects departed, her voice a little rough.

With his hands still roaming under her uniform shirt, he replied "Didn't hear you complaining."

"Couldn't talk, there was a tongue in my mouth." She said, sexily.

Harry laughed "Well...only a few people know about my cloak. And I'd...kinda like to...y'know...keep it that way."

"Well, good night, Harry."

"Night, Sue." Harry yawned. It had been a long day. As he took care of his business before going to bed, he thought the past term had been one of the wildest rides of ups and downs he'd had at Hogwarts. Christmas, he thought, should be great. It was only a few days away.

He was, just then, thinking of Sirius and Susan's family. He wasn't, at that moment, thinking of the fact that the Weasleys; including the female ones, were staying at Grimmauld Place. Nor, as he crawled into his four-poster in Hufflepuff's boys' dorm, did Voldemort enter his thoughts.

## Snake Eyes

Harry was moving along a corridor. There were no windows. The corridor was very strange, he'd never seen one painted black before. An occasional torch lit portions of it. Also strange to Harry was his point of view. He was looking at the corridor as if he were only a few inches tall, even smaller than Dobby.

Harry came to a door. It was numbered #101. There was enough room between the bottom of the door and the floor for Harry to get through. The room was huge, full of rows upon rows of shelves upon shelves. The shelves held glowing balls. Harry couldn't even begin to count them.

Harry saw a man; huge from his perspective. He stopped moving and reared up. That was when he realized he wasn't tiny. Rather, he was a snake. Or seeing through its eyes. Harry didn't seem to have any control over it. The man turned, pulled his wand and fired. The spell missed. Harry felt juices dripping from his fangs. The snake moved, and bit into the man's leg. Poison pumped into the wound and the man collapsed.

Harry woke up screaming. He was in his bed, at Hogwarts. Hufflepuff colors surrounded him. "Just a dream" he sighed. Then he noticed blood on his arm. The image of a man twitching feebly on a cold black floor filled Harry's brain. "MR. WEASLEY!!" he screamed. Full of fear inspired adrenaline he charged out of the dorm, through Hufflepuff's Common Room and into the school corridors. He was completely unaware of the fact that all he had on was underwear and a t-shirt, not even socks.

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"Stop!" an outraged Professor Weasley yelled at the errant student who had just barreled into him. "Petrificus Totalis!" he fired off. But, the spell spent itself on a stone wall as the running student turned a corner. He rushed off in pursuit, determined to exact severe punishment on the offender.

Twice more, Hogwarts youngest professor managed to fire spells. But, the running made aiming impossible. Suddenly, Percy realized where they were and grinned. Going straight dead-ended in Caretaker Filch's office. Turning left led to the Headmaster's office. There was nowhere else to go.

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Harry hadn't even been aware he crashed into someone. He only cared about one thing. Getting help for Mr. Weasley. And only Dumbledore, leader of the Order of the Phoenix was likely to be able to get help to an Order member. He crashed into the Headmaster's guardian statue. "Bloody hell!" he ranted "Sugar quill! Chocolate frog! Earwax! Bertie Box!!"

"So it's you, Potter! I should have known!" exclaimed Professor Weasley. "You have no business being out of bed! Fifty points from Gryffindor!!"

Frantically, not caring remotely about House points, Harry grabbed fistfuls of his robes and shook the shocked professor "Get me into that sodding office now, Percy!" he yelled

"Let go at once, Potter!" the furious Percy demanded. He struggled to free himself.

Harry pushed Percy right into the statue and yelled "NOW!!"

"Is there something you need of me, Harry?" the calm voice of the Headmaster interrupted.

In jerky, halting, partial sentences Harry replied "Mr. Weasley attacked!...Ministry!...Balls of light!...Big room!...Snake attacked!...101!"

"Harry, Percival, come in at once!" Dumbledore said, urgently. He led them up the stairs and into his office. Addressing one of the paintings, he said "Diyls, I need you to get help for an injured man in the Department of Ministries."

The image in the painting yawned and stretched “The problem with the living is they are always in such a hurry.” The former Headmistress said “And, must you be so loud?”

“NOW! Diyls!” Dumbledore exclaimed without raising his voice and sat down at his desk. Addressing his visitors, he said “You two boys can relax for the moment. Percival, why don’t you fetch your brothers and sister here. Harry, I believe you are in need of clothes...and...apparently shoes.”

Harry slammed his fist on the desk and demanded “How can you be so calm while someone is dying!?”

“I assure you, Harry, everything that can be done is being done.” Replied the Headmaster in his unhurried manner. “By coming to me as you did, you may well have saved Arthur’s life. We must not appear as though anything is amiss. The risk of letting Vold--“

Harry’s panic turned to fury “You’re more worried about some secret than Mr. Weasley’s life!!” he shouted, accusingly.

“That is not true, Harry. You do not unders—“

Harry threw up his arms in disgust and sneered “I never understand! Well, that’s your fault! Start answering my questions!”

“That is a discussion for another time.” Dumbledore said, tonelessly. “Meanwhile, a robe might perhaps do for the time being. And Madam Pomfrey should see to your feet.”

Harry frowned in confusion as he looked down. He’d been so pumped up that he never noticed. His feet were raw and bloody. Running through the stone hallways of the castle barefoot wasn’t the smartest thing in the world to do. He fell into a chair opposite the headmaster.

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The Medi-witch was finishing up when an army of redheads arrived, led by Professor McGonagall. “Potter, what is going on? And how did you injure yourself?” she asked.

“What’s happened to DAD?” Ron asked, overriding the professor.

Dumbledore had just received an update as Harry was being treated “Your father is out of danger, Mr. Weasley. He is at St. Mungo’s being treated for poison from a snake bite. Your mother has been notified and is on her way there.”

“We wanna go.” Ron demanded.

Dumbledore stroked his beard before replying “I am making those arrangements as we speak. I ask that you be patient.”

“What’re you doing here?” asked Ron, curiously, when he noticed Harry.

Dumbledore spoke before Harry could “That is rather involved, Mr. Weasley. But know that were it not for Harry’s presence, we would likely still be unaware of your father’s injury. As it is, Arthur should be home by tomorrow.”

“I-I d-don’t understand...” Ron stuttered “B-b-ut, th-thanks, H-h-harry.” While Fred and George echoed the sentiment, Percy displayed a look of loathing Snape would’ve been proud of.”

Making no acknowledgement of Harry’s presence, Ginny asked “When can we go?”

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“I am concerned about this type of contact between you and Voldemort.” The Headmaster said after the Weasleys departed. He didn’t look at Harry when he spoke.

Harry shrugged indifferently and said “Seemed right useful.”

“I recognize you have had a difficult time--” Dumbledore began.

Harry snorted “There’s a bloody understatement! Between Voldemort and the Dursleys I--”

"Honestly Harry, comparing your family to Voldemort is uncalled for." Dumbledore sighed. "And back to the subj--"

Harry cut the headmaster off with a grunt "They've come closer to killing me than Voldemort has."

"That is neither here nor there!" The headmaster snapped, losing his patience. Still not looking at Harry, he continued "Finding a solution for Voldemort's accessing your mind is important. I shall have to consider the matter. You may go."

Harry's face changed expressions half a dozen times. "Stupid old man." He muttered as he walked out, limping slightly due to the still healing scrapes and scratches on his feet.

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After Harry's departure, Fawkes appeared with a burst of flame and crooned.

"Ahh...old friend" Dumbledore said, softly. "Most distressing...this latest incident. And Harry's reaction...Can he not see the dangerous path he is following?"

The phoenix, still magnificent from its burning day in Harry's second year, dipped its head and puffed up its plumage. Fawkes whistled a low, sad, note.

"I regret that we might have to prepare for the worst." Dumbledore told his faithful friend. He waved his hand in front of a crystal ball on his desk and said "Severus, please stop by my office."

Fawkes looked highly alarmed and emitted a loud squawk.

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Harry had mostly stopped limping by the time he reached the common room. He muttered the password "All for one."



“Harry, you can’t go running out like the world ended and not say anything!” Hannah Abbott scolded him on sight. “And you’ve been gone forever!”

Harry sighed and fell into an armchair “Where’s Sue?” he asked.

“She’ll be right back.” Hannah replied “She just had to go to the loo.”

Practically on cue, Susan came down the steps of the girls’ dorm. She rushed over and, brushing her fingers through his hair, asked “What happened, Harry?”

“Long story” he started “Have a seat.”

Susan complied, sitting on his lap.

“Not there!” Harry complained. At her hurt look, he apologized “I didn’t mean it like that. My feet are all--”

Looking over, she saw the bandages “Sorry” she said.

“Running on stone hurts.” Harry commented. It took maybe ten minutes for him to sum up the last couple of hours.

“Ungrateful little bitch!” Hannah hissed at Harry’s description of Ginny.

Harry just shrugged. Susan wasn’t able to completely suppress a chuckle. “Oh...and by the way, nice outfit, Harry.” She said, teasingly.

“Cut it Susan.” He grumbled, not feeling particularly playful. It didn’t stop a blush from forming.

“EEEE!” she squealed “Gotcha! And is that chest hair I see!”

Hannah slapped her friend’s hand “Not now!” she said harshly.

“Someone’s jeal-eal-ous!” Susan said in a sing-song voice.

Hannah frowned and replied “Am not! And as for you Mr. Potter; Shame on you, corrupting this child.”

“HAHAHA!” Susan burst out laughing. “Harry’s as uncorrupt as they come. But, Miss Prefect here has a point. You really shouldn’t walk around in that, Harry.”

They’d succeeded in taking his mind off his worry. Harry couldn’t help laughing. “Alright! Alright!” he said, holding up his hands in surrender. “I’ll be right back!” With a kiss for Susan, he ran up the boys’ staircase.

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“No drooling!” exclaimed Hannah. She swatted her friend’s shoulder.

Susan giggled, then gave an anxious look. “Do you really think I should give him that present?” she asked.

“I can’t believe you’re asking that!” Hannah said, exasperatedly. “First! You worked on it the entire time you were out!”

Susan sighed “I know, but--”

“I wasn’t finished!” the blond Hufflepuff interrupted “Second, it’s one of the most thoughtful gift ideas I’ve ever seen. Especially after what you told me.”

Susan clamped a hand over Hannah’s mouth and whispered “SHUSH!”

“Besides, what else can you do? The holidays start tomorrow and Christmas is only three days away.” Hannah replied. “And how do boys do it so fast?! Here he comes already!”

Susan wiped away her troubled expression and greeted him with a smile and a hug “Well, now you can walk around the school. Not that I minded you in just a robe, you understand.”

“Err...I’ll see you later, Harry” said Ben Cadwallader. The Hufflepuff Seeker happened to have been coming out of his dorm at the same

time Harry was. Occupied with a kiss, Harry waved in about his direction.

Hannah shook her head amusedly and said "Come on Ben, I'll walk with you. Doesn't look like I'll be talking to MY BEST FRIEND for a while."

"Wicked!" the Third Year exclaimed, quite happy to be walking to breakfast with a Fifth Year girl.

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Arriving at the Great Hall, Harry spotted Hermione who was looking around very anxiously. It occurred to him that she might not know. Changing direction, he said "I think I'm gonna have to tell Hermione."

"Ron's gone, the twins, too, Ginny, Mr. Prewitt." The bushy-haired girl said as Harry as Susan joined her at the Gryffindor table. "And when you didn't show up...Harry, what's going on?"

Harry very softly explained to her what had happened.

"And I've (sniff) been so (sniff) mean to him." Hermione sobbed. She buried her face in Harry's shoulder.

Now he felt sorry for his harshness to her in the last Defense League meeting. Harry squeezed her hand and said "You had a fight. That's nothing new for you two. Remember last year. Ron was pissed at you over Scabbers."

"Huh?" asked Susan, with a curious look.

"That's a looong story." Harry replied.

Hermione laughed through her sobs at that "Too bad Crookshanks didn't catch him."

"Poor cat." Harry joked "Woulda ruined his stomach."

She swatted his shoulder and looked up "Thanks, Harry. Ya think we'll be able to go to St. Mungo's."

"Saint who?" asked Harry.

Wiping away the last of her tears, Hermione gave a cross look and said "Honestly, I wish you'd--"

--read?" Harry finished "That's what I got you for."

Her jaw dropped, and her face went from stunned, to angry. Finally, when the memory clicked, she laughed "Oh pish! Anyway, St. Mungo's is the Wizarding Hospital. There's the main building in London, and you stayed at the small annex in Hogsmeade."

"Never knew the name." Harry commented.

She shrugged and said "You would have if you'd read the sign."

"Hmpf!" Harry grunted. They all laughed, although Susan was more laughing just to go along. The merriment was interrupted by a most unpleasant sound.

"Hem! Hem!" Inquisitor Umbridge coughed. "Your antics this morning have come to my attention, Mr. Potter."

Harry instantly turned sullen "So?"

"Manners, Mr. Potter, are what separate us from inferior creatures. Mind yours." She scolded. "But, regardless, I require an accounting of your actions."

Harry stood up and looked down at her. He didn't exactly tower over her, but being a few inches taller than Susan, who had previously noted that she was taller than the former professor, left her at a definite height disadvantage. He asked "Did you ask Dumbledore?"

"What I discussed, or not, with the Headmaster is not your concern!" she snapped, not giving any indication she was intimidated. She tapped her foot a few times, then said "Well, I am waiting, Mr. Potter."

In response, Harry sneered "You can keep waiting!"

"Is there a problem, here?" the stern voice of Professor McGonagall interrupted.

"Your student is refusing to answer my question, Minerva." Umbridge replied. "I was just about to issue a detention."

That was when Susan spoke up. "Actually, I studied the wording of Decree #25 very closely." She said "And it does not give you the ability to make punishments, only modify them."

"Silence, Miss Bones!" McGonagall said harshly "Would a week satisfy you, Delores?"

Blinking in surprise, the Inquisitor nodded "It will do Minerva."

"Potter, you will report to my office on the first day after the Christmas Holidays and for five additional days." She said. Then turning to Susan, she added "And you as well, for speaking out of turn."

Umbridge looked delighted. "That is most satisfactory. Do have a pleasant holiday." With that, she turned to go.

"Thanks for nothing!" Harry muttered resentfully at McGonagall's retreating back.

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Transfiguration was Harry's final class before the end of the day. Everyone was excited about the start of the holidays. Harry was, too. But in Professor McGonagall's class he was almost openly hostile. When she called on him, he didn't respond. Hermione, even though she'd witnessed it, sent him more than one worried look.

"We will be covering the material in chapters 17 and 18 after the holidays." McGonagall announced "And, while I am not assigning homework per se, it will be instantly obvious to me if you have not at

least read it." Finally, with a rare smile, she bid her class a Happy Christmas.

Harry was the first out of his seat. "Let's get outta here." He said as he reached Hermione.

"Potter! Stay a moment, please!" she said.

Harry paused, he was very tempted to just continue.

"You're in trouble, Scarhead." Draco said with a smirk. He pushed Harry.

Hermione subtly tripped him. Combined with Harry's push back, the blond boy tumbled into the corridor. "OH! So sorry, Draco!" she exclaimed

"Mr. Malfoy, that will be twenty points from Slytherin for instigating." McGonagall said severely. She read the look between the two friends. "It's entirely all right Miss Granger. In fact, five points to Gryffindor for...for...ahh...creative subtlety." She offered.

Hermione grinned and said "Happy Christmas, Professor."

"And to you, Miss Granger." She replied. "Now, please excuse us."

After Hermione's departure, Harry faced McGonagall and asked tonelessly "Yes Professor?"

"Please, sit." She offered.

Shaking his head, Harry said "I'd rather stand."

"As you wish." She said, barely repressing a sigh. "It seems obvious that you are displeased with what happened this morning."

Harry shrugged and asked "What did you expect, Professor? First you sent me to get tortured with a Blood Quill, now this."

"I did what I did to keep you out of a detention with our Inquisitor." She explained.

Accusingly, he countered "Susan was doing a good job of that, but you punished her, too."

"Miss Bones was--"

Harry cut her off "Right! Sue read that decree forward and backwards. She's smarter than Hermione! At least when it comes to legal stuff."

"MY intentions were to protect you from Delores." McGonagall said, feeling defensive. "I wish you would believe me."

"Trust goes both ways." Harry said.

Where did that come from?! She wondered. Forcing shock from her expression, she said "I do not know what you mean."

"Did you believe us about the Sorcerer's Stone? What about the Chamber? And the big one, you didn't believe me about not putting my name in the goblet!" he fired off in rapid succession.

The Head of Gryffindor felt something clench in her chest. She had always secretly held a soft spot for the son of two of the best students she'd had. Maybe a couple weeks of no classes would enable her to figure out where she went wrong. Minerva knew Harry was unaware of how she'd argued against the Headmaster's doubts, she wondered if she should relate that story. Decades of habit won out. "There are things I would change, if I could, Potter." She admitted "Unfortunately, the past isn't one of them."

"How about Umbridge banning me from Quidditch, then?" he asked, challengingly.

This time McGonagall did sigh "That is one fight that I have, regrettably, lost. And, at this point, I would have a difficult time removing Miss Weasley from the team. She is an excellent Seeker."

"I'm better!" Harry snapped. There was no doubt in his voice. "But, Madam Bones taught me something during the trial. Use everything you have in a fight. You gave up. Well, I won't. I want Umbridge out of here and I want my position back."

McGonagall was hard put to keep a calm face "You have changed quite a bit this year, Potter." She observed, while trying to gather her thoughts.

"Getting beaten almost to death and starved to death will do that." He replied bitterly. Praise from the stern professor used to leave him blushing. Now, it left him cold. He started to leave "Was there anything else, Professor?"

McGonagall nodded sadly "I would imagine so. Happy Christmas, Harry."

"See you for detention when I get back." He complained in response and headed out.

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Among the crowd of students waiting to enter was Susan. Her Transfiguration class had mostly Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws in it. "Hey." She greeted, with a peck on the lips.

"Hi." Harry replied, not exactly enthusiastically.

"I'll be right in." she said to Hannah. Then, turning to Harry, she said "Let me guess...McGonagall."

Harry nodded, giving her waist a squeeze "She told me the only reason she gave me detention was to keep me away from Umbitch." He explained.

"Do you believe her?" asked Susan.

Harry shrugged "Dunno." He replied "Not really important. Thought you were doing fine, til she interfered. I'm just sorry you got nailed, too."



“Eh!” she grunted, dismissing it with a flick of her wrist. “A few detentions are good. Don’t think I’d get on the Wizengamot without a few. People think if you’re too clean, you’ve got something to hide.”

They were interrupted by Professor McGonagall “Miss Bones...if you please.”

“C’ya!” she said, cheerily. She got on her toes and kissed Harry’s scar.

Again, Harry felt a tingle of warmth flow through his body. He grinned at her departing backside...err...back... he meant, McGonagall was still there. “Professor.” He said, flatly and departed.

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A pensive professor faced her class troubled by a partial quote. Shrugging mentally, since it would never do to be seen shrugging, she tossed it out to the students “Someone said something about good wishes leading to bad outcomes. I’m having trouble recalling it. Anyone?”

A couple of hands shot up, followed by some hesitant ones, including--

Ironic, Minerva thought “Miss Bones?”

“The Road to Hell is Paved With Good Intentions” Susan quoted.

“That would be it. Five points to Hufflepuff.” She acknowledged. “Do you, by chance, know the reference?”

Susan smiled at the award, but shook her head at the followup question “Sorry Professor.”

“Sounds like Paradise Lost.” Michael Corner offered.

"It does, at that, Mr. Corner." McGonagall replied. "If you can prove it I'll give you five points as well. That goes for all of you, if you find the reference somewhere else." After that, the lesson resumed.

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Harry, since Ron was with his family at St. Mungos's, spent his free period in the Great Hall studying his Potions textbook. In a bit of clever manipulation, Hermione had pointed out that nothing made Professor Snape mad more than for Harry to do well. And, what could be worse than for Harry to excel in Potions?

"Never do you any good, Potter. You're pathetic at Potions." Draco Malfoy's taunt announced that the final class of the day had finished and supper would start soon.

Not bothering to look up, Harry replied "Bugger off Malfoy."

"Impudent wretch!" a different voice commented.

Harry flinched at that one. He looked up into the cold, hard face of Lucius Malfoy. But, somehow, after surviving a duel with Voldemort, the senior Malfoy didn't inspire fear. "You can bugger off, too!" Harry said, one hand going to his wand.

"Watch yourself, Potter!" growled Lucius "It is not wise to insult your superiors!"

With a sneer, Harry replied "Maybe I should ask Dobby if he wants to blast you again."

"The elf?!" Draco asked, incredulously "Father you told me you kill--"

Harry gaped in shock when his nemesis was silenced by Lucius whacking him across the mouth with his snake-head walking stick. The impact drew blood. As the furious Lucius shoved his son toward the Slytherin table, Harry continued to stare, unsure of how he felt about the scene. But, more people flowed in.

Luna Lovegood and Neville Longbottom were among the other early arrivals. Neville had to walk oddly to accommodate the blond Ravenclaw's skipping. "You teach wonderfully, Harry Potter." She said, dreamily. "I can't wait til next term."

"Thanks, Luna." Harry replied.

She leaned over and kissed his cheek "Happy Christmas, Harry Potter." She said.

"Err...you, too...Luna, Happy...ahh...Christmas." He stuttered, feeling flustered. His voice firmed up when he shook hands with Neville. He asked "What're you doing for the hols?"

Neville replied somewhat hesitantly "Well.I.I....Gran...that is...she and I have plans Christmas morning. Then Luna and her Dad are coming over for dinner. "

"So, Mr. Lovegood ain't mad at you anymore?" Harry asked, slyly.

Neville turned red, but Luna rescued him saying "I'm sure Susan's father would love hearing what you think of his daughter's ass."

"SHHHH!!" Harry hissed, glad that his girlfriend hadn't arrived.

Neville laughed loudly and said "She raises a good point, mate."

"Help me save a spot for Sue." Harry said as Neville sat. More people were flowing in. A lone owl entered the Hall and swooped down to Harry. At first, he mistook the owl for Hedwig. But as it landed he noticed that it had green highlights on its feathers instead of blue. He immediately recognized Ron's handwriting.

Hey mate,

Dad's fine! He woke up a bit ago. Healer Smethwyck wants him to stay a couple of days. So, we might be having Christmas here.

Dumbledore was here and explained everything. Dad wants you to come as soon as you can. To thank you in person.

Thank you Thank you Thank you Thank you Thank you

Ron

“That from Ron?” Hermione asked.

Harry had been so engrossed that he hadn’t seen the three girls sit down. Nor had he noticed that his meal had already appeared on the table. He nodded, handed the letter to her, and said “Yeah. Mr. Weasley will be ok.”

“That’s good.” Said Hermione, breathing a sigh of relief.

Harry patted her hand and said “I guess I’ll go tonight after the trip back to London.”

“I don’t think it’s a great idea.” Susan said, after sharing a worried look with Hannah. “At least...you shouldn’t go alone.”

Harry frowned at her “Why not?” he asked.

“Two names...” Hannah replied “...Molly and Ginny Weasley.”

“Pif” Harry grunted, dismissively “Besides, Ron said his Dad wants me there.”

Susan agreed “And I’m all for him thanking you, Harry. But, I don’t think you should have to face those two by yourself. Plus Professor Weasley... Plus....What’re the other two’s names?...The ones who think she’s a perfect little angel?”

“Bill and Charlie.” Harry answered “Only met them once. Charlie came with the dragons for the Second Task. And Bill was here for me as family.” He ended with a derisive snort.

Hannah sighed, wistfully “He’s a Curse-Breaker. Works mostly in Egypt, for Gringotts.”

“Thought you had a boyfriend.” commented Susan, teasing her friend.

Hannah shrugged "Do you mind?" she complained "No law against looking! He's bloody delicious!!"

"Too much info." Harry observed, feeling badly outnumbered. "Last I heard, he was dating Fleur."

Hermione nodded in confirmation "Seems there's nothing sexier to a veela than a man that doesn't drool all over himself just because she is a veela."

"ANYWAY!" Harry exclaimed, not interested in the female opinion of Bill Weasley. "Sue, you really don't have to. I can take care of myself."

Thanks to Hermione, Susan knew how to handle that. She replied smoothly "I know you can. But, four to one, that's not fair. Wouldn't it be nice to even the odds a little?"

"I guess." he said, flatly, still not liking it much.

She gave him a little poke in the side. "Aww, lighten up." She joked "I'm tougher than I look."

"That's true." Harry said with a sly smile.

Susan shot him a look and demanded "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You didn't look all that tough last night." He commented, still sporting the same smile.

Susan leaned forward and whispered "Oh...I see...and you like me like that...do you?"

"Ugh! Gagh!" Hannah complained, mimicking choking herself "Could you two be any sweeter?"

Susan and Harry were forced apart magically, and rudely, by Inquisitor Umbridge “Miss Abbott, it is a Prefect’s job to ensure there is no inappropriate behavior.” She scolded.

“Sorry, I didn’t see anything inappropriate.” Hannah answered.

Twisting her wand in her hands, voice up an octave, Umbridge explained “Public displays of affection are, by definition, inappropriate behavior.”

“Not that I’ve heard.” Hannah replied.

Amelia had seen the Inquisitor stop at the Gryffindor table and moved in “Is there a problem, Madam Umbridge?” she asked coldly.

“Merely addressing a discipline issue, Amelia.” She answered, falsely cheerful. “I do have that right as the school’s High Inquisitor. Whereas, you are here --”

Amelia cut her off harshly “I am fully aware of the terms of my mandate. I will be including in my report an excessive interest in my niece and her friends. Have you nothing better to do?”

“I am answerable to the Minister, not to you.” Umbridge countered.

Susan sent a warning look to Hannah, one of her Aunt’s hands had disappeared into her robes. She bumped Harry with her hip, forcing him to move down a bit. He, along with every other student in hearing range, was looking on in fascination at the building confrontation.

With steel in her voice and her magic beginning to vibrate around her, Madam Bones said “I’ve already ordered a session of the Wizengamot to submit a preliminary report. We will be meeting January 6th.”

“Procedure requires you to notify the Minister of Magic.” said Umbridge.

“I am perfectly aware of that!” Madam Bones snapped. “Now, if there is nothing else you need here.”

Scowling, Umbridge offered a hint of a bow, turned her back on her opponent and departed.

"That was ...err... interesting." Commented Susan, she was grinning ear to ear.

Amelia affectionately tugged at a lock of her niece's hair and said "Hush you."

"Yes ma'am." Susan giggled.

"I didn't get half of what just happened, but watching that toad change colors is wicked!" Harry exclaimed.

Favoring him with a smile, Amelia replied "I am sure I have no idea what you're talking about. But, that begs the question, why don't you fill that empty spot in your schedule with the Wizard Government class?"

"Err...never thought...about it." He replied, hesitantly "But...ahh...it's the middle of the year."

"We'll talk during the holidays." She said, then leaning down, added "I have some curious results on the other matter as well."

Harry almost jumped out of his seat. Ron's third cousin, the accountant, had been going through Harry's records for weeks. Hedwig had never been happier, though Harry had hardly seen her. Harry hardly wrote to anyone, except Sirius. So, a post-owl with no mail to deliver, was usually bored. She was still transporting documents from Gringotts to the accountant.

"Easy." Amelia cautioned

Harry couldn't completely repress a grumble "I know. Not the place or time."

“There’s hope for him, ain’t there, Auntie?” joked Susan. Then, in response to him pinching her leg, she whined “Auntieeee heeeee’s picking on meeee!”

Harry just smirked.

“You’re a big girl.” Amelia quipped and strode off.

“My own aunt!” Susan exclaimed, turning on him.

Harry laughed and shrugged “Well, she is my attorney.” He pointed out.

“HMPF!” Susan grunted.

Harry stood up and held out his hand “Come on.” He offered “I’ll carry your stuff to the train.”

CLANK! CLANK! CLANK! Came the sound of a spoon hitting a glass. The announcement confirmed Harry’s suggestion. “Attention everyone, please!” Dumbledore said “It has been an excellent term, overall. And I wish each of you a Happy Christmas. I hope to see you bright-eyed and eager after the New Year!”

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The Hogwarts Express was fired up and ready to go before the students finished boarding.

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Far to the south, at King’s Cross, Platform Nine and Three Quarters waited. As the scheduled arrival got closer, among them; A blond haired man picking up his sons; A red haired man picking up his sister; A tall black man picking up his son; A crotchety old woman picking up her grandson; A pair of dentists meeting their daughter; And a seemingly blind man in the company of a young woman and a guide dog.



## 23 – London

The Hogwarts Express screeched to a halt a bit after 8PM. The night air was cool, but not cold, and the cloudy night threatened rain.

Frank Bones stood in an alcove near the steps to Platforms Nine and Ten. He wore the long coat he had taken with him when he separated from the Royal Navy. Having spent time near both poles during his time as a submariner, he didn't feel the need to button up. Since Frank was a Squib he wasn't recognizable to most Wizards. He watched with bemusement as other relatives of Hogwarts students arrived. He quickly caught on and began making little bets with himself as to who was a Wizard and who was a Muggle.

"Excuse me, did I hear you use the word Muggle?" someone asked.

Frank nearly jumped out of his skin. He didn't realize he was talking out loud. "Er...sorry...didn't catch that." He replied. Tense, but with a carefully neutral expression, he turned.

"Maybe I should mention the word Gryffindor." The black man said, softly. He introduced himself as Evan Thomas.

Frank's sigh was partly of relief, that he hadn't broken a secrecy law. The other part was of frustration Bloody genes! I don't even reach this bloke's shoulders! he thought.

By the time students started popping out of pillars they'd grown quite friendly. "Y'know, Frank, I must've seen that a hundred times before Dean got his letter." Mr. Thomas said.

"It amazes me that Muggles don't see what's right in front of them." Frank agreed "And, really, Wizards don't make too much of an effort to hide. But, I guess they don't have to."

Evan laughed and nodded "Believe me, I see what you mean. Spotted your sister yet?"

"No...but I'm pretty sure that's your son." Said Frank. "You know...freakishly tall--"

Evan guffawed and countered "Oh...I thought you were kneeling." He called out "DEAN!! OVER HERE!!"

"DAD!!" Dean called back. He rushed over and embraced his father "How's Mum? Vernie gonna be here for Christmas?"

"Everyone's fine, even your old man. Thanks for asking." The elder Thomas replied. "Ye'll tell me all the new mag--"

Dean cut his father off, hissing "Dad! The secrecy statutes!!"

"Don't worry. I'm meeting my sister. Hi, Frank Bones."

Taking the offered hand, Dean introduced himself "You must be Susan's brother."

"I asked you a fuckin' question, Potter!" the shout echoed.

Dean threw up his hands "Not a-bloody-gain!" he complained. "Look, I hope they don't use wands. But, just in case, stay here!"

Taking barely a moment to look at each other, the two non-Wizards took off in pursuit. The scene of the disturbance was two boys scuffling and rolling over scattered luggage. Seamus had gained a momentary advantage by being on top and punched Harry in the mouth, drawing blood. Harry's hands shot up, grabbed his opponent's throat and squeezed. Seamus clawed at the hands, but his eyes bulged as Harry tightened his grip.

Dean yanked Seamus off of Harry and lifted him clear off the floor. He wasn't anywhere near as muscular as Frank, but being over six feet tall had its advantages. He dropped Seamus against a pillar and held him there "Cut it git!" he growled into his friend's face.

"Lemme go Dean!" Seamus growled back.

Harry had managed to get to his feet. Blood mixed with tears, staining his face. "Yeah!" he shouted "Let's finish it! Not my fault his girlfriend won't write to him!!"

“Cool it, Harry.” said Frank, as he stepped in front of him. Harry’s attempt to shove him aside was almost laughable, given the results. Hardly anyone followed it, but Frank had him in a full nelson headlock in something under a second. He squeezed just hard enough to leave Harry feeling a little faint.

Susan, who had just burst through the pillar hollered “FRANK! Let him go!”

“Assuming he’ll stay calm.” Frank commented, warily, as he loosened his grip on Harry’s neck.

Harry nodded sheepishly and rubbed his neck “Sorry about that, Frank. Oww! My neck!”

“What’s going on here!?” Station Security yelled, showing up just after the nick of time.

“Nothing, officer.” Susan lied smoothly. “I dropped my bags, and my boyfriend went to pick them up. Then, that boy” (she pointed to Seamus) “accidentally tripped over him. And then--”

Station Security interrupted her impatiently “Right! Fine! Just move along! Collect your stuff and get going!”

Under security’s watchful glare, Seamus retrieved his bag “See you after the hols, Potter.” He said in a cheery sounding tone.

“Can’t wait, Finnegan.” Harry replied, in similar fashion.

As a group, Hermione came up in the company of a blind man, his dog, and a young woman. “Honestly, Harry.” She scolded “You could have avoided the whole confrontation if you’d simply told him that Ginny was visiting her father.”

“I woulda...if he didn’t practically break my ears yelling!” he snapped at her.

Having witnessed the whole scene, a fashionably dressed couple stepped forward "Come along Hermione!" the woman said sharply.

"Mum, Dad, wait!" she said "That wasn't Harry's fault. Well, not really. That was Seamus Finnegan, the boy I told you was--"

Hermione's father nodded "Somewhat understandable." He commented "Though, brawling like that--"

"Harry might not have been entirely innocent in this." The blind man offered "But I assure you, it wasn't all his fault either."

The Doctors Granger looked at each other, confused "Forgive me, sir," Mrs. Granger finally asked "but, how could you know that?"

"Very simple." He replied with a chuckle "This young lady, who is wearing a lovely blue top, and myself wanted to bring Harry's dog to the station. Remus Lupin, at your service." He unfalteringly offered his hand to Hermione's father.

Harry knelt down and vigorously rubbed the dog's neck "How ya doing, Snuffles?" he asked

The huge black dog licked Harry all over his face, cleaning away the drying blood. Woof, Woof

"Yeah, I'm fine." said Harry.

Frank, looking surprised, commented "It's like the mutt really understands."

Snuffles growled, threateningly.

"Alright, boy." Harry said. "This is one of the good guys. He's Susan's brother."

Sirius approved of Susan, wholeheartedly. Snuffles howled and trotted over to the muscular man.

“We should, I think, depart quickly.” Remus suggested. He slapped his thigh a couple of times and added “Come Snuffles.”

Snuffles barked and obeyed.

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The trip to St. Mungo’s was a brief affair. The group walked for about ten minutes.

“This dump?!” Hermione’s father asked, disbelievingly. To him, the whole area was a fenced off, condemned building.

Tonks brought out her wand and said “If I might, Dr. Granger? There are security spells affecting you.”

“I would never have known.” Hermione’s mother whispered in awe at the sight. “Amazing!”

Stepping into what was apparently an ordinary elevator, the group was whisked upwards then to the right.

“Didn’t know elevators could do that!” Hermione’s father exclaimed.

The bushy-haired witch laughed lightly and said “Sorry, Daddy, came as a bit of a surprise to me, too.”

The sign above what was recognizable as a nurse’s station said CREATURE INDUCED INJURIES in foot-high red lettering. An ancient, dour looking witch sat at the desk.

“Hello!” Remus said, brightly “We’re here to see Arthur Weasley.”

Without looking up, or at any charts, she replied “Ward three, to the right, third door on your left, room six. Do not disturb the patients or you will be expelled from the facility. This is your only warning.”

“Thank you very much!” Remus replied cheerily. “Have a lovely day!”

The witch gave a sour look. Everyone turned away.

“Who invited you, Potter?” an angry Bill Weasley asked.

Ron glared at his brother “Harry saved Dad’s life!” he snapped.

“Yeah right!” Bill retorted “Its just some pathetic story to get back in good with us after what he did to Ginny!”

“That’d be the little slut with the big mouth? Right, sis?” Frank asked, from beside Susan.

Next on the scene was Charlie, who was bringing up a tray of drinks from the Visitors’ Tearoom. “You got a big mouth, twerp!” he snarled.

“I call’em like I see’em...Macho.” Frank countered.

Tonks separated the two men with a spell that even Hermione didn’t recognize “I think that’s enough testosterone, boys.” she said.

“Watch what you say about my sister!” Charlie hissed, getting back in Frank’s face.

In the same tone, Frank countered “Watch what your sister says about mine!”

“The first one that takes a swing spends the night in Azkaban!” Tonks threatened.

Charlie’s jaw dropped “You wouldn’t do that to me, Tonksie.” He said jokingly. They’d been classmates back at Hogwarts.

“Don’t bet on it, Charlie.” She said, emotionlessly. “You, too, Frank.”

Never taking his eyes off Charlie, Frank said “I never throw the first punch. Just, the last.”

“Let it go, Frank.” Susan said, softly.

Everyone was quiet as a couple of orderlies and a Healer passed by.

“How about...if I take Harry in.” Remus offered “We’ll keep it short.”

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On seeing Harry, Mrs. Weasley rushed over and attempted to hug him.

“Don’t touch me!” he said tightly.

She blinked in shock and pulled back “Harry, I--” she began.

“How are you, Mr. Weasley?” he asked, talking right over her.

Arthur Weasley, normally a vigorous, active, man, was pasty white and very tired looking. His right leg was surrounded by a swirling pattern of red and gold lights. “Albus...tells me...I...if it...wasn’t for y-your...w-warning, I’d...prob...bably...b-be dead.” He wheezed. “I...hurt...everywhere...but it...beats be-ing dead.”

“I’m just glad...you’ll be alright.” Harry replied, rather choked up “I...don’t want...anything bad to...happen to you.”

Arthur managed a weak smile “Thank you, Harry.” He said. His hand came up and blindly waved around.

Harry took it to mean he wanted to shake so he held the waving hand. Harry felt the hand go limp. He gently laid the arm across Mr. Weasley’s chest.

“He insisted on seeing you.” Mrs. Weasley said “Hasn’t slept a wink since he woke up. Just wouldn’t let himself go. I don’t fully understand...But, thank you...and well...I’m sorry.”

If it hadn’t been for the confrontation in the hall, things might’ve played out differently. As it was, Harry glared at her and said “Don’t apologize to me, apologize to Susan.”

“WELL...OF ALL THE...” Mrs. Weasley’s temper flared “Now you listen here!”

Snuffles, standing next to Remus, growled at the Weasley matriarch, baring his teeth.

"I think it would be best for Arthur if we weren't to disturb his rest further." Ironically, the werewolf being the coolest head in the room, said Remus. He nudged Harry toward the door, but practically had to drag Snuffles along the smooth hospital tiles.

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In the hall outside Mr. Weasley's room, Charlie and Bill were closest to the door. They gave Harry nasty looks when he emerged, then went in. Hermione and Ron were at the end of the corridor talking privately. That was the most encouraging thing Harry had seen come of this whole mess.

"So, how is he?" asked Susan. She and Frank had been talking with the Grangers.

Harry shrugged "Alright, I guess. He thanked me, then went right to sleep."

"And, how are you? You look miserable." She asked.

Harry snorted "Gee, thanks."

"You know what I mean." She replied, slipping an arm around his waist.

Harry leaned on her shoulder and said "Yeah, sorry. It's just somehow, I don't feel any better. I mean I'm glad Mr. Weasley's OK. But, obviously Bill and Charlie hate me--"

"No kidding." Susan commented "And the way they look at me is just plain creepy."

Harry tensed. One hand involuntarily clenched into a fist "They shouldn't be!" he said, angrily "They're way too old! And besides--"

"Only you should be checking me out?" she asked playfully.



Frank growled "Not funny sis."

"Yes it was." Teasing her brother, she replied "Anyway, that's not what I meant by creepy. That look, I can recognize. No, this was different. I can't explain it."

That was when Hermione came rushing over, tears streaking her face. "Well, Happy Christmas" she said, not looking happy. "Mum, Dad, can we go?"

"Hermione what's wrong?" asked Harry.

She wiped at her eyes and replied "Nothing, nothing at all." Then she broke into tears and threw herself at him. Between sobs, she cried "I guess...you can...say I...told you...so! He broke... up...with me!"

"Cancel that." Harry replied, his arms went around her. He wasn't sure what to do, or say. But, at least his 'date' with Cho had taught him what NOT to. Over her shoulder, he and Ron locked eyes for a moment before he went into Mr. Weasley's room. "I'm sorry. I'll talk to him." He told her.

After a few minutes, she pushed away. Her face was now a complete mess. "No, Harry, don't, please." She said "I don't want you risking your friendship with Ron."

"I won't, but you're my friend, too." Said Harry "You did the same for me, with Ginny."

That was said just as Mr. Prewett, accompanied by his great-granddaughter, appeared "And that's what I meant Grand-pa. Always talking about me behind my back." She said.

"SHUT UP, GINNY!" Susan yelled.

This brought hospital security, which Tonks handled "I will personally remove them." She promised.

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"I do have a present for you, Hermione." Harry said, as he helped her into a car that would've had his Uncle Vernon green with envy. Harry hardly noticed. "I don't suppose you'd want to come--"

Hermione shook her head.

Mrs. Granger offered "If you'd like Harry could visit us."

"I'll send an owl." Harry replied.

Mr. Granger shook Harry's hand and said "You didn't exactly make a great first impression. But, now I understand why Hermione is so fond of you."

"I didn't start that fight, Mr. Granger." Harry replied.

Getting into the car, Hermione's father nodded "I believe that. Please, stop by during the holidays."

"Good night, sir." He said, giving Hermione a wave.

Leaning against his own car, Frank asked "So, are all your train rides this exciting?"

"Quit it, Frank." Said Susan, slapping him in the stomach.

Harry chuckled a little "You do know, I was just--"

"I understand completely, Harry." Susan interrupted. She'd said it in her letter to The Prophet, that seemed so long ago. They could fight, but Harry would never cheat on her. It wasn't in his nature. "You don't have to explain anything. Hermione looked crushed. When they started talking I was sure they were working things out."

"Right, sorry, but it's getting late." Frank announced "We do have a bit of a drive, Suz. See you over Christmas, Harry."

After Frank let go, Harry shook and flexed his hand "Quite a grip." He commented. "Hate to imagine if he didn't like me."

“Poor baby. Lemme kiss it better.” Susan said. She proceeded to do so, and licked the back of Harry’s hand for good measure.

Harry leaned against the back of Frank’s car and kissed her “Gonna miss you.” He said, gruffly.

“A whole two days. It’ll seem like forever.” Susan said, playfully, before kissing him again.

Frank blasted his horn, causing the young couple to jump. Remus and Tonks, who had been ‘not looking’ chuckled lightly. “Better not test those big brother instincts too far, Harry.” Remus joked.

“Nice seeing you, again, Professor Lupin.” Susan said, then to Tonks, a little unsure of her name “Nice meeting you...Auror.”

Harry waved as the car left the parking lot. And, he watched until the tail-lights were lost in the distance.

## 24 – Happy Christmas Harry (part 1)

Grimmauld Place had improved considerably since Harry's last stay, over the summer. The foyer hadn't changed, it still needed work. But, the living room was no longer the grimy place it was. The walls had been stripped down to brick and scrubbed clean. Referring to the furniture, Sirius explained "This stuff's just temporary."

"Doesn't matter." Harry said to his now-human godfather. "I'd rather sit here in a pile of soot than in all the Dursleys' spotlessness."

"We'll talk about your relatives another time, Harry." replied Sirius. "Right now, it's the day before Christmas Eve. And, I say have fun!"

Harry laughed "I can live with that."

"Butterbeers all around." Sirius announced, flinging an arm around Harry's shoulders. "Remus, let's hit the kitchen. You too, Nmyphie."

Harry cringed beside Sirius when he heard Tonks growl "Sirius!"

"She secretly loves it." Sirius pretended to whisper. They all sat down and he waved his wand at a cabinet. Four butterbeers floated to the table. Harry took a swig and frowned slightly. Sirius noticed and asked "Something wrong?"

Harry looked at the bottle and shook his head "Nah, not really." He replied "Just not the same. Susan's Dad works for a butterbeer maker, and I guess I just got used to that."

"In other words, your stuff isn't good enough!" Remus chuckled.

Sirius threw his bottlecap at him and retorted "Nothing wrong with my butterbeer!"

"Don't listen to them, Harry." Tonks said "Frankly, Harry's smart. Good way to make points with the girlfriend's father."

Sirius nodded thoughtfully "Makes sense." He admitted "Keep up the good work, Harry. Imagine, my godson and my favorite cousin Nymphie all sneaky. Kinda gets you right -- HEY!!"

Harry heard Tonks mutter something, then his godfather's head snapped back and broke out in a massive case of boils. Harry burst out laughing, followed by Remus. Tonks acted like nothing had happened.

"You really should get that skin condition checked, Sirius." Remus chortled, causing another burst of laughter.

Looking much put out, Sirius called for his House Elf "KREACHER!"

"Traitor Master called?" the bent old elf sneered.

Sirius glared "Did you carry out my orders, Kreacher?" he asked.

"Kreacher obeys all Master's orders." The elf replied, then sneering at Harry, added "Potter brat's room is prepared. All blood traitors, too."

That confirmed what Harry thought "That explains the clean kitchen, The Weasleys are still here, aren't they?" He finished the sentence hesitantly.

"Are you saying I can't clean?" Sirius asked, pretending to look offended.

Remus snorted in amusement "Kid's got you pegged."

"Yes, Harry, the Weasleys are here." Sirius replied, choosing to ignore his friend. "And, not counting that scene in Mr. Weasley's room, we've mostly gotten along for the past couple of months."

Harry crossed his arms over his chest. "The way I see it, she owes me and Sue an apology. And in front of the whole school, for that Howler." He said, stubbornly.

"Harry, I really wouldn't expect that." said Remus patiently "I agree she was wrong, but to expect her--"

Glaring at his former professor, he countered "Then why did I get detention from McGonagall for not apologizing to Finnegan and his girlfriend?!"

"I didn't know about that, Harry." Remus said, surprised by the outburst.

Harry made a disgusted noise and said "Well, that's not your fault. But, why do Snape and Mrs. Weasley get away with insulting people I care about?" Getting nothing but an uncomfortable silence, Harry decided to go to bed.

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Christmas Eve saw little of any Weasley at Grimmauld Place. The four of them, along with Kreacher's grudging assistance, gave a portion of the house a Christmassy look. Special candles in all the bedrooms, even the unused ones, gave off swirling red and green lights.

"Found a tree." Tonks announced as she returned from her work shift.

Sirius took to that with a vengeance. "Move it, Harry." He ordered.

"But, Sirius, how's it gonna fit? The ceiling's not high enough." Harry queried. And, when somehow, the twenty foot tree stood up straight in the ten foot room, he commented "I love magic."

As they were decorating, Sirius poked and prodded his Godson carefully avoiding any mention of the fight. "You and the lovely Miss Bones certainly seem affectionate." He teased.

"She's great." Harry replied, with a blush. He bobbed an ornament which crashed to the floor and broke. "Sorry."

Remus laughed, waved his wand and the pieces vanished "Don't distract the poor kid, Sirius. He'll never get any work done. Raging hormones and all."

“This’d go faster if we used magic.” Harry said, trying to change the subject.

Sirius, looking grim, swung an arm over the teen’s shoulder and said “Now, Harry, as your Godfather, it is my duty to discuss the facts of life with you.”

“Uh-uh!” Eyes bulging Harry exclaimed, fearfully. “Not with -- (he pointed to Tonks) – around! Besides I--”

The young Auror ruffled his hair and commented, lightly “Oh, it’s not so bad. Besides, you do need to know that you shouldn’t feel up defenseless girls in dark rooms.” She finished by winking at him.

“Huh?” Harry questioned. Then he remembered back to August, when exactly that happened in the Dursley’s house. And just who the ‘victim’ was. He blushed and mumbled “Sorry, Tonks.”

Sirius immediately burst out laughing “Well--done! And -- an older -- woman -- at that!”

“Perhaps we should leave the boys alone.” Remus suggested, with quiet humor. He offered an elbow to Tonks.

She blushed vividly, which for a Metamorph, is saying something. She literally turned the color of a stop sign.

Sirius shook his head and clicked his tongue “Now you kiddies behave yourselves. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t.”

Harry tugged on his collar nervously, the tension in the room was stifling. The Talk didn’t particularly appeal to him. Nor, did he have much interest in the sudden attraction between Remus and Tonks.

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Loudly talking Weasleys entering Grimmauld Place brought a welcome relief. A least a mostly welcome one, at first. “Very nice, Sirius!” Mrs. Weasley exclaimed, admiring the decorations.

"Well, thank you Molly." Sirius replied amiably "I appreciate the loan of some of your decorations. Couldn't've done it without my team, of course." He casually flung an arm around Harry's neck.

Smile immediately dropping, and giving Harry a stony look, she repeated "Of course." in a flat tone. Then, resuming her normal voice "I think we've all earned a good meal!"

"How's your Dad, Ron?" asked Harry. He glared at Mrs. Weasley's retreating back.

"Don't see that it's your business." Charlie sneered.

Ginny, rather surprisingly, defended Harry "Stuff it, Charlie!" she snapped. She addressed Harry rather softly, saying "Thank you, Harry. Dumbledore explained everything."

"I didn't do it for you!" Harry snarled, resentfully. He was smarting from Charlie's nastiness; plus Bill had a similar expression. Then, there was Mrs. Weasley, he continued "Or your stupid mother!"

Ginny's eyes flashed furiously. She advanced on Harry, shouting "NOW YOU SEE HERE--"

"NO! YOU SEE!" Harry cut off her rant. Only Ginny coming to a halt avoided Harry poking her in the chest. "I'm sick of both of you! And soddin Finnegan! You keep that little fuc--"

Ron and the twins had been stunned into inactivity by the sudden shouting match. But, Harry backing their little sister against a wall enraged the oldest Weasley brothers. They managed to get in each other's way at first, but Charlie managed to shove Harry away. Harry stumbled into a chair and spun around. He swung a fist wildly, catching Bill in the temple. Bill pushed Harry, who again stumbled. Bill grabbed Harry by the throat and pinned him against the opposite wall.

"Do you have any doubt I could permanently change your life?" Sirius threatened, pushing his wand deeply into Bill's neck. "Let him go! NOW!"



Bill complied and started backing away. That was when Harry tagged him in the mouth. Bill brushed his mouth and flicked the droplets of blood at him, saying with a sneer “You’ll pay for that, Potter.”

“You think you scare me?” Harry taunted “Come back when you’ve gone a round with Voldemort.”

Bill, in fact all the Weasleys except for Ginny, flinched at the name.

Harry gave a disgusted snort and repeated it “Voldemort! Hell, come back when you can say his name, coward!”

“Why you!” Bill bristled at the insult.

Sirius pointed his wand again and ordered “Kitchen, now. You, too, Charlie. Either of you start with Harry, you’ll have me to contend with.”

“Well, that was interesting.” George commented as his oldest brothers stalked off.

“Those two need to loosen up, seriously.” Fred replied. “What do you think? Level three?”

George blinked in surprise “A little much, oh handsome one. I think Level two will do just fine.”

“Did I hear my name?” asked Sirius. To which everyone groaned.

“Can I help?” offered Harry.

They both shook their heads and replied “The less you know, the better.”

“Ok. So, like I asked before, how’s your Dad?”

Ron looked a little sad “Had a bit of a bad turn.” He replied “Probably won’t get out til after Boxing Day.”

“Sorry.” Harry replied quietly.

Just like during the Tri-Wizard Tournament “Ok...let’s go help in the kitchen.” George said.

“Yeah, come on Sirius.” Fred added. “Let’s leave these two alone.”

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“So...” Harry began, uncomfortably. But his thought died.

Ron flopped down on the nearest couch and, just as uncomfortably said “Yeah.”

“About--” Harry began.

Ron exhaled explosively “You know what she’s like.” He complained “Language, Ronald... You should eat more Harry... Did you finish Professor Snape’s essay?... Yada Yada Yada!”

“I’m not taking sides, Ron...honest...” Harry replied “But, mate, she cried....A lot.”

Ron ran his fingers through his hair, a gesture copied from Harry. “You gotta believe me, mate, I didn’t want that. It’s just ... well ... I’ve already gotta Mum.”

“Don’t take this wrong.” Said Harry “But, Ron, you’re not...ahh...that is...anyone else...err...are ya?”

Ron gave him a dirty look “Good ole Ron, you mean?” he asked sarcastically “Emotional range of a teaspoon?”

“I didn’t say that.” Harry sighed “And I don’t think Hermione thinks that, either. It’s just that that was the worst part of my breakup with Ginny. I guess, if it’s not that, you two can work it out. Or is it she’s --”

Ron shook his head “Nah, I don’t think she’s cheating.” He said dismissively. “I’m just tired of my girlfriend treating me like a ten year old.”

"Guess that's why I like her. But not that way." said Harry, more to himself than Ron "She acts like the Mum I never had."

Ron snickered at the comparison "If you say so." He replied, lightly.

"So, what'd ya get me for Christmas?" asked Harry, eager for a subject change.

Ron eyed him narrowly and countered "What'd'ya get me?"

"I asked you first." Harry pointed out. "Besides, mine's really good!"

"Fine, be that way." Ron declared.

Harry shot back "Fine, I will."

"Guess you'll have to wait til tomorrow." Ron taunted, tossing a pillow at Harry.

Snatching it effortlessly, Harry zinged the pillow back "I'm still the best Seeker in Hogwarts."

"Weasley's still the King!" said Ron as he slapped it away.

They both laughed until they were interrupted "Ronald! Come to dinner!"

"See how she left me out." Harry commented.

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Dinner lacked a lot of being a festive Christmas Eve affair. While Fred and George were their normal boisterous selves, Harry and Ron were continuing their conversation about his breakup with Hermione in hushed tones. Ginny sat between the oldest Weasley boys who were distinctly on the outs with the other men in the room. Most of the general conversation was of the "Pass the salt ... or ... here's the rolls" variety.

“Hey, Remus, watch this.” A mischievous looking Harry said as he dropped his plate in the sink. “Soooo, Sirius, my invitation to Susan’s house included one for ‘an adult’ Interested?”

Sirius blanched “Harry, considering that I...what I mean to say...ahh...Remus.”

“You mean my Godfather doesn’t wanna meet my girlfriend’s family?” Harry pouted.

Remus eyed the exchange curiously, but didn’t offer any help to his friend.

“Harry, I’m an escaped criminal.” Sirius reminded him “Please tell me you didn’t mention my name.”

Harry snickered “Course I did. Sue said she misses her cuddly Snuffles.”

“You’re having me on?” Sirius asked wide-eyed.

Harry shrugged “More or less. Thought you might like to get outta here for a while. Figured it was the best Christmas gift you could have. Even if its just as a dog.”

“You should’ve seen your face, Sirius!” Remus laughed “I can only think of twice James ever got him that bad! Sirius, remember that time with Helen Lo--”

Sirius jumped out of his seat and clamped a hand over his friend’s mouth “YOU SWORE!” he exclaimed

“You’re right.” Remus replied. Glancing at Harry, he apologized “Sorry, Harry, have to save that one til you’re older.”

Harry gave Remus a sad look, while Sirius looked just as put out “Oh, no, my friend. THAT ONE is off limits totally!”

"I assume you obtained Professor Dumbledore's approval for this little trip." Mrs. Weasley interjected herself into the conversation. Her tone was one of distaste.

Harry glared at her "It's the Holidays." He replied "I don't see that it's any of Dumbledore's business what I do!"

"You watch your mouth, young man. Or you'll find yourself on restriction for the entire holiday." Mrs. Weasley threatened.

Possibly immaturely, but accurately, Harry shouted "YOU'RE NOT MY MOTHER!"

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"Come on, HARRY!!" Ron yelled in his ear. Harry tried to defend himself and ended up getting dumped out of bed and onto the floor.

Harry groaned as he stood "How come you can't wake up like this every other day of the year?" he complained.

"Hurry up!" Ron ordered, ignoring the question and yanking on his arm.

Harry managed to get his robe mostly on. Ron finally let go as they hit the bottom of the stairs and tore into the living room. Four identically shaped boxes were there, in different piles "Not very original, Sirius." He commented to his Godfather.

"Just wait til you open it." Countered Sirius "Happy Christmas!"

Harry grinned "You, too.-- Dobby!"

"What's this?" asked Sirius.

"Well, we all know how much you love Kreacher." He explained "So, I asked my friend here if he could help out."

The elf bowed to Sirius and said "I's too happy to be helping Harry Potter's great godfather. Harry Potter explainted hows yous was prisoned wrongly. Kreacher is a bad elf."

"Thank you Dobby, I really appreciate it." Said Harry.

Dobby stood there blushing and grinning happily until Sirius suggested he start with breakfast.

Before any of the presents could be opened a scream combined of Charlie's and Bill's voices yelled "POTTER! YOU LITTLE SHIT!!"

"Not bad, not bad at all!" Harry laughed.

The two oldest Weasley boys, who both had long hair, had strands of their hair extended upright. Half the message was on Charlie's, the other half on Bill's. And they were stuck to each other. The message read WE LOVE HA (on Bill) and RRY POTTER (on Charlie). Plus it blinked like a Muggle neon sign.

"Don't steal..." Fred began.

George continued "...our thunder."

"WE DID IT!" they continued as one.

"Quite..hmhm...ni....haha...nice" Harry managed to get out before cracking up.

Wand out, Mrs. Weasley barreled in "FINITE INCANTATUM!" she roared. Which was totally unproductive. "She pointed at the twins and demanded "Undo that immediately!"

"Sorry, Mum!" George snickered.

Fred finished "It's timed for six hours!"

"I have to go to France in two!!" Bill complained.

Harry calmed down and was the first to speak again "Right, Ron, Fred, George, you guys know what I found out at Gringotts. And this way I'm making up for not being on the team."

"They're not!" Ron exclaimed. The three boys gaped at Harry for a second then attacked the identically shaped boxes. Each contained a Firebolt.

Struck speechless, Mrs. Weasley left the room.

"And such good deeds don't go unrewarded." Sirius said "You might want to open yours, Harry."

Ron's mouth fell and in an awed whisper, he said "The Firebolt XL isn't due out for another year!"

"Wicked!" Harry exclaimed "We can run these around as soon as we get back to school!"

Having been obviously left out, Ginny observed "Don't see much point." She was surprised to see her three brothers glare at her.

"Nobody asked your opinion." Harry said harshly. Then turning to his Godfather, added "Hey, Sirius, float down the other two, will ya. I say we leave right after breakfast."

"Two..." Fred asked.

George finished "...more."

Ron just croaked

## 25– Happy Christmas Harry (pt2)

“You owe me the decency of an answer, Harry Potter!” Mrs. Weasley shouted. She was again objecting to Harry’s leaving Grimmauld Place apparently without the Headmaster’s knowledge.

Harry had ignored her first question, then now, her shout “Ready to go, Sirius?”

“I see no harm in it, Molly.” offered Sirius, in an attempt at reasonableness.

She sneered at him “And what qualifies you? Additionally I have gone to considerable trouble to put together a large meal. And further, that girl is en---”

“SHUT UP! SHUT UP!!” Harry exploded. It took longer, but Molly began expanding, like his Aunt Marge had.

A blinding white flash from Sirius’ wand broke Harry’s concentration, though. All the Weasley children rushed to help their mother into a chair.

“Don’t you...ever...talkabout...Sirius...likethat...” Harry panted “Or...Susan...again...Or I’ll---”

Sirius cut him off “It would be best if we left. Happy Christmas. Let’s go Harry.”

“Fine.” Harry said tightly. “Oh...and I can cook just as good as you.”

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At the Bones residence, the fireplace emitted a short high-pitched screech that announced incoming Floo travelers. The sisters were



dozing together on the couch. Susan squealed and ran for the bathroom, dumping Tina to the floor.

“Wha’th?” the preteen mumbled, rubbing her knee. She rolled over and found herself face to face with the biggest dog she’d ever seen. “EEP! A grim!” she squeaked. To Tina’s shock, the dog licked her nose.

Fortunately, Snuffles was saved from any further trouble as Harry arrived. “OOOF!” he landed with a thud. The floo had tossed him out and he landed flat on his back. “I can’t wait til I can apparate. Bloody thing.”

“Me neither.” Susan said lightly “Doesn’t make for a stylish entrance, does it?”

Harry, who was still holding a grudge toward Mrs. Weasley, immediately forgot everything as he looked up “Swwwooooo!” he whistled “You look incredible!”

“You like?” she asked, then helped Harry to his feet. She put her hands behind her neck and bounced her thick thatch of bright red hair around. She twirled around.

Blood pounded in Harry’s ears. He’d only seen the dress once, when Susan bought it. The velvety material hugged every curve. He had to swallow a lump in his throat. Despite her confident stance, Susan blushed under Harry’s inspection. The pink tinge found its way down her neck, which Harry noticed.

“So kiss her already!” Tina exclaimed, then giggled.

Harry drew Susan in and kissed her. He let go of her hands and ran his up her bare arms. Susan’s went around his waist. Snuffles howled.

“Did I hear a---“ Susan’s mother burst in.

Harry pulled away from Susan, feeling embarrassed “Hi, Mrs. Bones” he said, shyly.

“That is a grim, isn’t it?” she asked, nervously.

Counting himself lucky, Harry replied “Yeah, but really, he’s not dangerous at all. Sue knows him from when I was in the hospital. He’d never hurt anyone.”

“He kissed my nose, Mum.” Tina said with a giggle.

Though skeptical, Mrs. Bones replied “I’ll take your word for it. But, if something happens.”

“Come on Snuffles, show Mrs. Bones how good and smart you are.” Said Harry.

In response the dog got up on his hind legs and offered a paw. When Susan’s mother shook the paw, Snuffles licked her hand lightly “Oh my!” she exclaimed “A gentleman dog! Well, I suppose.”

“Stop showing off.” Harry scolded, he bent down and flicked one of Snuffles’ ears. “He’s been a little confined while I was in school and I thought maybe he could run around your yard a little.”

That was when Susan’s father entered the room “Harry Potter.” He said, with a touch of stiff formality.

“Good to see you, Mr. Bones.” He replied “Happy Christmas.”

Neil Bones had been the target of a sometimes not very subtle campaign from every member of his family. And the closer Christmas got, the more intense it got. His youngest daughter couldn’t be blamed. But, his wife and even his sister-in-law had gotten into the act. He finally surrendered when Frank ‘turned traitor’ He had certain concerns, but he promised to make the holidays comfortable. Shaking hands warmly he returned the greeting “Happy Christmas, Harry.”

“Thanks.” Harry replied with a grin. “I got something for everyone. If you can unshrink them.” He pulled five tiny packages from his pocket.

Damn, the kid's a charmer. Neil groaned internally. "Allow me, engorgio."

"I'm staying with one of my Dad's best friends." Harry explained "He told me you could never go wrong with Firewhiskey. For you Mr. Bones."

"This is over two hundred years old." Neil observed, he couldn't keep the delight out of his voice.

Handing a larger package to Susan's mother, Harry said "Sue told me you're going back to work when Tina starts Hogwarts. So I got you a set of Potions equipment."

"First rate!" Joan Bones said, inspecting a balance. Everything was top quality. "Very thoughtful, Harry." She embraced him and kissed his cheek.

Harry blushed vividly and turned to the largest boxes "This one's for you, Sue. And one for Tina. I also got one for Hannah."

"Buying other girls gifts?" asked Susan.

Harry shrugged "Just because she's your best friend."

"A FIREBOLT!!" Tina yelled "HOLY SHIT!!" She wrapped herself around Harry's legs, toppling them both.

"Christina Marie Bones!" Neil exclaimed.

Tina crawled her way off Harry, leaving him to splutter in an effort to get her blond hair out of his mouth.

"Young lady, you know we do not approve of that language in this house." Joan lectured her. "You're grounded."

Tina pouted and looked down at her feet "Sorry, Mummy."

"Tomorrow, that is." Neil amended.

Meanwhile, Susan pulled Harry to his feet. She couldn't help laughing. Harry gave her a slightly cross look. "Oh, come on, Harry." She laughed "You beat dragons, You-Know-Who and his followers. And what happens? My little sister flattens you!"

"Oh yeah!" Harry hissed in her ear. He grabbed Susan's waist in both hands and squeezed, causing her to squeal.

"Harry, we all want to thank you." said Mrs. Bones "But, and please don't take this wrong, any one of these gifts is rather expensive. Even the Firewhiskey, which I wonder how an underage wizard...When you add it together...Do you see my point?"

Harry let go of Susan's waist, she took his hand though, he nodded "I do ma'am. But, I just found out my parents left me a lot of money. I always thought the vault I paid for my school supplies with was all there was. I never really spent much. But, now that I know...well...I guess I went a little crazy."

"I must admit, I was shopping for Potions equipment." Susan's mother said, with a smile "And you did choose very well. Very well indeed."

Susan, looking a little unsure of herself, went to a pile of still-wrapped presents and retrieved hers for Harry. The shape was that of a book, though it was larger and heavier than most.

"You got me a book!?" asked a surprised Harry "Sure you're not Hermione?"

An almost human laugh came from Snuffles.

"She didn't buy it! She made it!" Tina exclaimed.

Susan nodded "I sorta started it by accident." She explained "You were in the hospital. And I was bored. I had to take my mind off the trial, so...." She handed it over.

"Dragon scales?" asked Harry when he tore off the cover.

Susan nodded “Mmhmm. And the pages are also made from them... very thin...I wanted to do it right. Mum got them.”

“It’s beautiful.” Harry said. He blushed at the inscription that said With Love, Sue.

“What’s it say? What’s it say?” asked Tina, bouncing up and down.

Susan planted a hand on top of her sister’s head and said “NOYB!”

“Git!” the little blond girl whispered. “I helped too, so it is so my business!”

Harry wasn’t paying attention to the byplay between his girlfriend and her sister. He had turned the page to what he recognized as a Family Tree – His – Five Generations of Potters Susan had titled it. In what had to be one of history’s big pranks, Harry’s Great-Great-Great Grandfather, the man at the very top, was named Draco Potter...he could only groan. It was just wrong. He noticed that one line running from Draco Potter, down, was blinking. Asking how didn’t occur to him, as it led him directly to James and Lily Potter, beneath them his own name. A reference note, in Susan’s handwriting, directed him to page 80. There were more than a dozen pictures spread across the two pages. The two largest were a wedding picture and Harry’s birth announcement. His voice cracked with emotion and tears filled his eyes “It’s amazing!”

“I didn’t want to make you sad.” Said Susan. “I mean...I thought it might...I almost didn’t give it to you...Look I can get you something else. Forget about it.”

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Neil gave his wife a mildly cross look when she pulled him into the kitchen “I’m not keen on leaving them alone like that, Joanie.” He complained.

“And you think they don’t find alone time at school.” Susan’s mother pointed out. She had also tugged her younger daughter along. “You stay here as well, Tina. In fact, help me with dinner and we’ll consider

your grounding served. Just thank Harry properly later and watch your tongue.”

Without being told what to do, Tina started slicing cucumbers for salad. “Yes, Mummy.” She said, sounding contrite, but hiding a smile with her focus on her work.

Joan stroked her daughter’s long blond hair while addressing her husband “Neil, our little Suzy is all grown up. You did read her letters, did you not?”

“I still think they got too close too fast.” grumbled Neil “She’s so young.”

She scoffed in response, teasing “Just because you were so old. Dad had a tough time with you being five years older, I remember.”

“I’m only five years younger than Harry.” Tina observed. “Oww” (giggle)

Joan had swatted her daughter on the behind, but didn’t actually comment. “At any rate, nothing’s permanent now, and even you admit she could do worse.”

“I’ll get the ham cooking.” Neil said, displaying a grimace.

She wrapped an arm around him from behind and squeezed “Thank you, dear.” She whispered in his ear. Then she nipped him lightly.

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“Got you all wet.” Harry apologized, pulling his face from Susan’s shoulder.

“One of the advantages of spaghetti straps.” Susan joked.

Harry let out a wet snort and wiped her shoulder “Pathetic, ain’t I?”

"Of course not!" she replied, kindness mixed with a little exasperation. "Sometimes I start something. Then I get a little obsessed and go way overboard. I'm sorry I upset you."

Harry wiped a last tear off his cheek and said "You didn't...Well, what I mean to say...Yeah, I cried, but it wasn't because I was sad---" He broke off, not knowing what else to say. Seemed like a moment for a kiss, he thought.

Susan agreed and wrapped her arms around his neck. They kissed lingeringly, but softly. "That mean you like it then?" she asked.

"Didn't know what you would get me." He replied "Actually, didn't know you would get me anything. It's pretty amazing, though...just like the girl that made it."

She almost felt insulted at the first thought. But, Harry's second thought turned her to so much goo. If she hadn't leaned against him, she would've crumpled. "Amazing?" she asked, surprised how strong her voice came out.

"Actually, I said pretty amazing...and well...pretty...pretty." He replied.

Susan blushed, she couldn't help it. Shades of red and pink stained her cheeks, shoulders and cleavage. "Aww... Stop it, Harry."

"I'm serious." He replied as he wrapped his arms around her shoulders.

Good old Snuffles chose that moment to howl softly.

Harry guffawed and nudged his transformed Godfather with his foot "Fine." He said "You can be Sirius if you want. I'll be serious."

Snuffles whined, laid down, and covered his face with his front paws.

"Quite a smart dog you got." Susan said. She sat in a chair near Snuffles and gave his head a thorough scratching.

Harry couldn't help feeling slightly guilty for lying --- well omitting the truth --- "Yeah, he's quite a character."

"Almost human." Susan said.

Harry stiffened. For once he was grateful they weren't in contact. He didn't know how Sirius managed not to react. Damn, she's smart. Casting about for another topic, he said "So, where's Frank?"

"Well, it's still technically a secret. Buuuuut..." She said with a playful glint "...About now, he should be down on one knee. Waiting to get kissed."

It took Harry a moment to work that through. He asked "He's proposing to Paula Polkiss?"

"Yep." Replied Susan, with a nod.

"Well, good on him." Harry replied.

"He'll be here, sooner or later." Susan smiled in agreement "So, wha'd'ya wanna do?" she asked.

".III.I" Harry said. His eyes were drawn to her figure.

Susan stood, walked over to him and pushed him onto the couch "Let me rephrase that." She added "Bearing in mind that my parents are less than thirty feet away...What would you like to do?"

"Right." said Harry. He ran a finger between his shirt collar and neck. "How about telling me about this?" he indicated the book.

Susan sat beside him, curled her legs up beside her and leaned against Harry "That we can do." She replied, playfully. "Come on Harry, focus."

"Ulp...right." He said "You know this really isn't fair."

Susan giggled and teased "Come on, it's just me. So where to begin?"



“The beginning?” Harry offered.

She gave him a back-handed swat on the chest “Smart-ass.” She chuckled “Right, fine. The idea started with Hannah, even before we got together. Even before you and You-know-who broke up.”

Harry snorted in amusement.

“Well, you started it.” Susan observed “Anyway, like I was saying. At the time, you two were fighting and Hannah said if she didn’t have a boyfriend and you broke up...well, you get the idea.”

Harry did, not that Susan wasn’t beautiful. But, Hannah had inspired a hard-on or two...late at night. He shook himself slightly.

“Watch it, buster!” growled Susan. She poked him in the chest.

It didn’t hurt, it tickled. Harry retaliated by digging a finger into her side.

Susan squealed and tried to slide away. As Harry tried to wrestle her onto his lap, she twisted and rolled off the couch altogether.

A look of concern flashed to his face, which turned to shock as she pulled him to the floor. He landed on top of her. That might have ended it, but this was hardly their first play fight. Certain parts of Harry’s back were vulnerable to his girlfriend’s touch.

“Give up?” asked Susan as she dragged her fingernails lightly across his ribs.

Harry gritted out “NO!” between clenched teeth. He never knew whether it hurt or tickled when she did this. He may have had one of Susan’s arms trapped above her head, but he couldn’t capture her other hand. Then, his whole body shivered when she changed tactics and drew a torturous line down his spine. He yelled “NEVER!!”

“Fine by me.” Susan laughed. Her hand roamed under Harry’s shirt seeking another sensitive spot.

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Several things happened at nearly the same time “WHAT IS ALL THAT BLOODY NOISE!” Neil Bones yelled from the kitchen.

A flash of light and two pops overrode an immediate answer. “What... pray tell ...is going on here?”

“Hi Auntie!” Susan squeaked. She gave a cute wave and waggled her fingers.

Harry rolled off Susan “Thisisntwhatitlookslike.” He mumbled hurriedly. ‘Not good’ he thought noticing a bulge in his pants. Thinking about it only made it worse. He rushed to sit up and curl his legs before looking up.

“What it looks like, is you laying on my niece on her living room floor. Or am I hallucinating?” asked Amelia Bones in an icy tone.

Harry stuttered and stammered. Susan pointed out “Technically, not true, Auntie. Right now, Harry’s sitting next to me on the floor.”

“Auntie Ami!” Tina yelled as she bounced into the room.

While holding her youngest niece, the most powerful witch in England warmly greeted her in-laws. Some of her colleagues might have been appalled at her behavior. “Happy Christmas everyone.”

“Hedwig!” Harry exclaimed, happily leaping to his feet. His snowy white owl rapped on the Bones’ front window. He rushed out the door and returned with her on his shoulder.

“Animals are quite averse to apparation.” Amelia explained “So I gave her a note and addressed it here.”

Harry smiled and said “Thanks Madam Bones.”

“Harr-ummp!” the man who had accompanied Amelia coughed impatiently.

Despite Harry's assumption, the man wasn't a wizard. Amelia introduced him, specifically looking at Harry. "My apologies" she said "This gentleman is Edward Weasley. Mr. Weasley, this is Harry Potter. Harry, Mr. Weasley has spent the last month working on your financial records."

"Ron, Fred and George are my closest friends." Harry replied. "Nice to meet you."

The accountant merely nodded at Harry, not taking his offered hand. "My contact with my relations is negligible." He said, gruffly "Though I do appreciate your business. If it isn't too much trouble, I would prefer a professional distance, Mr. Potter."

"Err...Ok" Harry replied, uncomfortably.

"Would you care to join us for dinner, Mr. Weasley?" Susan's mother offered "There's always plenty."

He shook his head and replied "Thank you, no. I have much to do and would rather offer my report and go."

"Joan, how long before dinner?" Amelia asked.

She replied "We just put the ham in, so it'll be a couple of hours yet." While Susan's mother was a talented witch, and used magic quite frequently, she refused to 'take shortcuts' with everything. One specific event was her Christmas dinner. All preparation, done by hand. Cooking done on totally Muggle, though modern, appliances.

"Good." Amelia replied. Then, turning to her brother-in-law, requested "Neil, might we borrow your den?"

Neil waved his hand expansively in the direction of his home office.

The accountant struggled with a large, heavy box.

“Allow me.” Amelia offered. She pointed her wand at the box and cast Winguardium Leviosa; it floated out of his hands, moving in the direction of Neil’s den.

The sour man followed the box into the room.

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“Poor Harry.” Susan commented, as the door shut. “He doesn’t like people like that, much.”

Neil had to work for something positive to say “Now, Suzy, there’s something to be said for dedication.”

“Is he a Goblin?” asked Tina.

Susan laughed out loud. Neil hid a smile with his hand. Joan told the young girl to “Get back to work.”

## 26 – Happy Christmas Harry part3

No one had really paid attention, but Snuffles had slipped into the den along with Harry. The Grim took up a spot near Harry's feet. Hedwig was quite content perched on Harry's shoulder, as it had been nearly two weeks worth of work for her.

Neil Bones' den was large, capable of hosting a meeting with his department heads if he chose to. Harry noticed a number of award plaques. As it turned out, despite living in very different worlds, Susan's father had a similar career to Harry's uncle. Though Neil now ran the manufacturing plant for his company, he had started as a salesman for Kinison Butterbeer. The knowledge left Harry feeling a little uneasy.

"Same as before, Harry." said Madam Bones, almost reading his mind. "I felt it best you be informed first. Let me ask, you liked Susan's gift?"

Harry nodded "It was nice." That was all he said, but his voice cracked with emotion.

"She asked me to delay. I do not often make decisions like that. But in this one case." She said apologetically "You apparently impressed our Goblin friend. He at least bent the rules for you. Hedwig delivered a copy of your parents' will and not ten minutes later a Gringotts owl arrived asking for its return. Naturally, I complied."

Harry looked disappointed and said "oh."

"However the letter did not say I couldn't make a copy." She added, patting his shoulder. "There are a few spots that are hard to read. But the document is almost a hundred fifty feet of parchment and I don't think we need that much detail today. In fact, would you not rather see your parents speaking?"

Harry gasped "Really!"

"Memoria apparata" Madam Bones said with a wave of her wand.

James' head and torso appeared. He went through identity confirmations. Then, the same for Lily. In both cases the images were a little fuzzy and distorted. The voices were faded and sometimes missed words completely. Harry didn't care, though. He listened, raptly.

Unable to leave his Animagus form. Sirius whimpered sadly at the sight of his long dead friends.

"How much did you understand?" Madam Bones asked after the images faded.

Harry looked embarrassed "Err...that is...I mean I was listening. But I--"

"The original will would be crystal clear." Madam Bones explained "But, I suppose you were more interested in just hearing them rather than what they were saying."

Harry rubbed his eyes and nodded "Thanks." He said.

"You're welcome." She replied gently. "Much of the will is an accumulation from your ancestors and a list of assets. What we just saw was made shortly before your parents' deaths. They obviously knew they were being targeted."

That much, Harry knew.

"In a few words," Madam Bones continued "They willed the entire estate to you as their only child and they made provisions for your care. That included the vault you have been accessing since you started at Hogwarts. Your parents also made custody and guardianship arrangements that obviously were not honored."

"Huh?" Harry snapped. A magazine sitting on the table near him was suddenly on the floor without being touched.

"Could you not discuss those details at another time?" Edward Weasley requested, bluntly. He opened his box and lifted out a huge stack of Muggle style paper. Without waiting for permission he began

“My office entered all the data from your statements, Mr. Potter, into our computer and our audits turned up a number of oddities.”

Amelia felt it might actually be safer, after the flicker of temper from Harry, for the accountant who was a Squib to give his story now. Magical folk could resist accidental magic. “Why don’t you proceed, Mr. Weasley? I’m sure you would prefer to be enjoying the holiday with your family.”

“Rubbish!” the accountant declared “Complete waste of time! At any rate, I understand you are aware that your most recent statement showed a balance of--”

Harry didn’t much care for this Weasley and felt like showing him up “Forty million Galleons.”

“Precisely GG41,602,004 factoring in a large number of Sickles and Knuts as of the 30th of September.” Mr. Weasley said, without consulting any of the pile of papers. “This was my first piece of evidence that you are a victim of considerable embezzlement.”

Harry didn’t know the word. With a confused expression, he grunted “Huh?”

“He means that someone has been stealing from you.” Amelia explained.

Edward pushed a small bunch of stapled pages across the table to Harry and said “That is the first statement after your parents’ deaths. It shows a beginning balance of GG43,116,875 and an ending balance of GG39,105,994.” Barely looking, he pulled a single sheet from the middle another large stack and continued “Your Ministry charges a ten percent inheritance tax, which explains the drop. This is the law Madam Bones provided to me.”

“So?” asked Harry “It gained like two million Galleons, seems pretty good to me.”

The accountant shook his head disgustedly and said "Children! Consider that for ten years, you were completely cut off from the Magic World."

"Err...Wizarding World" Harry corrected him, rather pleased at showing him up.

Mr. Weasley ignored the comment saying "Under the terms of your parents' will the trust vault was to contain one hundred thousand Galleons and be replenished to that level at the beginning of each year. Now, the only expense that should have incurred was a GG100 annual maintenance fee. However, every year, the trust vault was almost completely emptied and had to be refilled from the family vault."

"And from the statements, you were able to determine where that money went?" Amelia prompted.

Nodding, Edward answered "Yes, Madam Bones. At least most of it. What I can account for is noted as a monthly GG4,000 payment to the executor of the estate. And a GG2,000 payment to a financial advisor, who in my opinion, doesn't know his ass from a hole in the wall."

"Why?" asked Harry, he giggled at the comment from the sour man. It had been the only sign the accountant had a personality.

"Even with these deductions a decent advisor could have added five million Galleons to your wealth in that period, Mr. Potter. An exceptional one, such as myself, might have come close to doubling your estate." the accountant replied. There was a noticeable tinge of arrogance in his voice.

"Subject to Mr. Potter's approval, of course," Amelia offered "perhaps you could assume that function once we sort out these irregularities."

For a moment, Harry was reminded of one of Ron's smiles. But, the expression vanished and Mr. Weasley replied in his monotone "If we can come to a reasonable fee structure. But, as you say, that is for later. I regret that for the final large transaction, I can only report that



GG2,000 per month was converted from Galleons to Pounds and was withdrawn. On average, your trust vault was emptied of all but two to three thousand Galleons each year and had to be refilled from nearly nothing.”

“So, we have another mystery person on our hands, Harry.” Amelia pointed out.

Highly annoyed, he nodded “So I can see. I have a question. If I’ve been getting wiped out every year, how have I been paying for school, books, robes, all that stuff?”

“An excellent question, Mr. Potter.” The accountant commented, enthusiastically (well for him) “And it is perhaps a useful hint. Beginning in 1991, your first year at Hogwarts, the payments dropped by just enough to cover those expenses. And the level remaining in your trust vault at the end of each year has dropped to nil.”

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Ironically, at that moment, Griphook called “Next!” and a wizard approached his window.

“I have transactions to perform on behalf of Harry Potter.” He announced.

Griphook sneered at the wizard “And do you have his key?”

“Of course I do, you dolt.” He replied, impatiently “And I must say, service has been miserable today.”

Griphook sniffed “While we Goblins do not acknowledge your holiday, the bank only has minimal staff. Follow me.”

“Is there any chance you could walk faster?” the wizard complained. “I am very busy.”

Griphook was highly insulted, but kept his silence. “Keep your arms in the cart, sir.” He cautioned with a sinister smirk “Gringotts is not responsible for loss of limb, only loss of life, in our caverns.” Then,

the cart started. But, instead of the usual 2 setting the Goblins used for humans, he flipped the latch to 5, which was the maximum speed. Griphook took wicked pleasure in watching the color fade from the wizard's face and his cheeks stretching all out of shape.

"That was uncalled for and will be reported to your superiors!" the wizard growled as the cart braked to a stop.

Griphook replied "Just fulfilling your request for haste, sir...Vault 187...Key please."

"WHAT!!" the wizard roared in uncontrolled fury as the massive door swung open. There were coins in the vault, here and there. Glittering of precious metal, in scant supply. Handfuls of coins, where, last time there had been mountains. He would have reduced the pile to this point. But, to arrive and find so little... "EXPLAIN THIS...THIS OUTRAGE!!" he demanded, incoherently glaring down at the creature who scarcely reached his knees.

Griphook brought out a spear that couldn't possibly have been hidden any way other than magically "You will calm down, or I will lock you in that vault and leave instructions to open it in my will!" the Goblin threatened. "It is neither my, nor my institution's responsibility to keep track of withdrawals. That is what statements are for!"

"Take me out of here!" the wizard ordered, seething.

Furious at the ill-mannered human, Griphook threw the cart into motion before he completely seated himself. Griphook delighted in the smell of fear that reached his nostrils during the ride. Then as the exit appeared Griphook, instead of breaking gently over a distance, waited until the last moment and threw the breaks hard. He could tell the mechanism had been ruined. That replacement costs would come out of his pay felt unimportant just then.

"I would see your superior!" the sweating, pasty-faced wizard demanded.

Griphook gave him a light jab with the tip of his spear and replied "On vacation! Come back after New Years! OUT!" Taking their cue, two

young Goblins, practically children, escorted the wizard out of the bank.

“Of course.” The wizard said, flatly, as his cold logic returned. He threw his cape around himself and disappeared from Diagon Alley.

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Christmas dinner at the Bones Residence began shortly after Edward Weasley’s departure. The room was fairly large, sporting an oval shaped heavy table which could easily seat a dozen. The six of them sat around one side, without bunching up

Harry learned, thanks to Tina, a good deal about how children of magical families are educated before going to Hogwarts. The youngest Bones was fascinated with money, it seemed. Or, at least the math of converting Knut to Sickles to Galleons. “Any number! Any coins!” she requested, insistently, of Harry.

“Do stop badgering him, dear.” Joan scolded her after the eighth request.

Tina giggled and eyed her mischievously “How can I, Mummy?” she asked “You’re a Hufflepuff, so’s Suzy so’s--”

“EAT! Dear.” Joan ordered. And a roll jumped off the serving tray and flew into the young girl’s mouth “Don’t want your food to get cold.”

Looking put out, Tina tore off a bite and chewed. A ripple of laughter went around the table.

“So...Harry” Mr. Bones began, drawing warning flashes that he ignored “From Sue, I understand you are staying with the Weasleys during the Holidays. Is that correct?”

Talking through a bite of cabbage, Harry replied “Yes sir.”

“Is that not awkward?” he probed “I assume that includes the daughter and the big mouth mother.”

Harry recognized he was being interrogated and set his fork down, though he couldn't help smiling at the description "Ron and two of his brothers are still my best friends." He replied

"Did you consider how Susan might feel about you being under the same roof as, what's her name? Jenny?" Mr. Bones asked.

Susan dropped her fork, purposely and loudly, it clanked across her plate. Her tone was carefully neutral "And did you remember that I told you, Father? After Harry told me? He didn't try to hide it."

"You shoulda seen her face when they opened their brooms." Harry said, with a smirk.

Susan's eyes widened "How many Firebolts did you get?" she asked.

"Hmm..." Harry thought "Eight?...Lets see...Three...yours...ahh...that's another three...Oops, sorry, Hermione's makes seven. Oh, but I got an XL as a gift...so I guess it is eight."

Madam Bones couldn't help chuckling "It occurs to me, you may have thrown certain people a little monkey wrench, Harry."

"How, Madam Bones?" he asked.

"Well, first, I think we should simplify things a little." She replied "Use our first names, especially when Joan and I are present."

Harry nodded.

"Good." She continued "Now, tell me Harry, I'm sure all that plunder drained your trust vault. How much was left, do you suppose?"

Harry shrugged, thought for a moment and replied "Only a few coins."

"Well, for the record, you shouldn't go crazy spending like that." She admonished, then holding up a hand, "But, in this case, I rather approve. Now...How do we turn your little one into a nice big monkey

wrench?" Amelia began tapping the prongs of her fork on her nose, and her expression became very calculating.

"Uh-oh, now you did it, Harry." said Tina, ominously.

Susan guffawed and rubbed her boyfriend's shoulder "Yeah, you called down the thunder. Now, prepare for the whirlwind."

"I don't get it." Harry said, nervously "Madam Bones are you alright?" It didn't help that she didn't reply, or even blink. She just kept tapping her fork.

"That...Harry...is Auntie's thinking mode." explained Susan "It usually lasts a few minutes. And the result is always bad for the bad guys. Remember what she did to Umbridge at my trial."

Snuffles barked just then. Harry knew that Sirius understood exactly what was funny and laughed "Errr...do you mind if I gave Snuffles some ham?...He's been laying there smelling all this delicious food, and well..."

"Butter up the mother." Susan observed with a giggle "How very Slytherin of you."

Harry grinned at her while cutting a thick slab of meat. He leaned over and put a plate on the floor. Snuffles began devouring it. Harry scratched his head. Susan leaned down as well and 'snuck in a kiss'

"Obviously, Ami is still working." Neil Bones commented generating a round of chuckles. "How about we walk around outside, Harry?"

Snuffles made a pitiful whine and Harry slapped him on the nose "Quiet you!" he hissed at his disguised Godfather.

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"Susan's mother is a Potions Mistress. She grew all of this." Mr. Bones said proudly "I'm sure some of it has made its way into Potions ingredients at Hogwarts."

Harry nodded and replied "Sue told me. It's one of the first things I learned about her. That, her birthday, and her being left handed."

"I noticed you kept bumping elbows." Susan's father commented, amusedly. "You were just outnumbered in that."

Harry was surprised at his change in demeanor, but went along with it. "To tell you the truth, sir, it has been a little....strange...around here for me." He replied "I keep wanting to move things."

"You're in a house full of lefties. You're the oddball." Mr. Bones joked.

Harry had been called odd all his life, most of the time, by people who hated him (notably the Dursleys) This situation didn't feel that way, so he laughed, too. It was more in the tone of the way Susan teased him. "Funny, I always thought there was something wrong with her." He retorted.

"Hmph" Mr. Bones snorted "My daughter's perfect."

Harry sighed wistfully and said "Yeah."

"I want to ask you something and I expect an honest answer." Mr. Bones snapped, suddenly harsh "And I guarantee I'll know whether you are, or not. Some purebloods marry off their children for influence or money. Is that what you're trying to do? Because if it is, I will not have it!"

Harry froze in mid-step, stunned as effectively as if hit by a petrificus spell. "I...I don't even kn-know wh-what any of th-that means!" Harry stammered. His whole body shook with the sudden flood of emotion. One of Mrs. Bones' potted plants, that was sitting on the fence, fell and shattered.

"I believe you." said Susan's father, calmly. Beneath that shell, he felt a cold fear. Accidental magic never caused damage in magical houses. While he was a brilliant executive, Neil was an average wizard who had squeaked out an OWL in Defense Against the Dark Arts, never touched the subject again, and never used his wand in anything like a duel since.

Hurt etched in his face, Harry started to leave. "It's a little cold. If you don't mind, I'd like to go in." he said. That was a transparent lie. First, The Isle of Wight was experiencing a warm spell, and even if it wasn't they were inside a greenhouse that was even warmer than the house.

"I'd like to explain, if you'll let me." Mr. Bones said quietly.

Harry paused leaving an opening.

"There is a tendency for fathers to overprotect their daughters." He began "And, I'm probably worse because Suzy was a frail baby. I really only want what's best for her. My parents...they were an arranged marriage...They never loved each other, and after we, meaning my brother and I, took up careers they stopped talking to each other."

"You mean, they're divorced?" asked Harry.

Mr. Bones shook his head sadly, "Oh, no, that would never do. No, they'll be married...and miserable...until the day they die. I love my Joan with all my heart, but I think part of the reason I fell for her is because she's Muggleborn. Edgar probably did the same with Amelia. Neither one of us wanted an arranged marriage."

"I d-don't know ab-about m-marry...I mean marriage." Harry said, nervously "But, I...she makes me happy."

Neil couldn't deny it "So I've seen. And, I've also watched you today...very closely...Did you know that everyone in this house has been after me for the way I handled myself after Suzy's trial? I wasn't at all kind to you, in fact I was barely polite."

"Yeah well."

Shaking his head, he said "No, it's not good enough. I let my feelings cloud my judgment. I apologize."

"Does that mean, then, that--" Harry began

Neil still couldn't quite manage the words, but he nodded "Why don't you ask everyone, except Susan, to come out here and watch the sunset with me?"

"Ok." Harry replied, then he grinned and repeated it enthusiastically "OK!"

Susan's father groaned inwardly and watched the boy's - very fast - retreating back.

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"What's all the noise? Where's everyone gone?" asked Susan, who was just coming out of the bathroom.

Grinning happily, Harry replied "Your Dad invited them into the garden to watch the sunset."

"Let's go then." She said, heading for the door.

Harry snagged her hand and said "He...ahh...didn't invite us."

"How come?" she asked, frowning.

Harry replied by pulling her into his arms "He told me to send everyone but you."

"How'd that talk go?" she asked.

Fingers locked around her waist, he replied "Not bad, and have you noticed we're alone?"

"EEEE!!" she squealed. Then she took two deep breaths and asked "Does that mean what I think it does?"

"More snog, less talk." Harry ordered, and Susan readily complied.

On the couch, the couple quickly found a comfortable position and got to it. Susan's figure-hugging dress brought new temptations that about drove Harry crazy. His hand made its way beneath the dress



and fondled a bare butt cheek, he spread his fingers as wide as possible to feel as much as possible.

Susan broke the kiss and took to sucking on his neck and moaned "Harry."

"Mmmmm" he replied, head buzzing. It was then that he decided this was his favorite Christmas ever, by far. "I I--"

And that was when the rear door burst open, the first voice was Tina's, asking "....Frankie gonna come?"

Having no time to get totally resettled, Susan remained in Harry's lap. Though, she leaned back against the arm of the sofa in a more casual pose. Silently cursing her family's sudden interruption. Harry, likewise, jumped in surprise. He rapidly withdrew his hand and placed it on his girlfriend's knee. At least Susan's body provided cover for what would have been an embarrassing display.

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"Ma...that is...Amelia" said Harry, rather proud of his normal sounding voice "did you happen to think of something?"

Amelia sat in a chair across from the couple and pulled Tina in with her "As a matter of fact, I did." She replied "I don't think we'll have any difficulty flushing out these mysterious characters. Though, we'll need to do it on New Years when your trust vault is filled."

"Told ya. Thunder and whirlwind." A giggling Tina commented. Her aunt poked her in the ribs.

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After sitting and just talking for a while, and noticing that it was totally dark outside, it was time for Harry to leave. "Thank you for dinner, Joan." He said.

"You're quite welcome, Harry." Susan's mother replied "And thank you again for your wonderful gift." She gave him a hug and pecked his cheek.

Not quite comfortable yet with her father, Harry shook his hand and said "Happy Christmas, Mr. Bones."

"You, too, Harry." Neil replied.

An antsy and eager Tina threw her arms around Harry's waist and hugged him tightly "Thanks for the broom, Harry!" she exclaimed "And if she don't marry you, I will!"

"You're welcome, Tina." Harry replied a little uneasily. He returned the hug, putting his arms around the small girl's shoulders.

Susan gave her a light slap on the head and said "Alright shortie, no boyfriend stealing."

"Not gonna be shorter than you forever." Tina retorted. Then she bent down and kissed the big dog's nose. "Bye-bye Snuffle-poo."

Harry exploded with laughter and got growled at in response. Snuffles barked and licked Tina, very wetly, all over her face. And, after a lingering, though chaste, good-bye kiss with Susan, Harry stepped into the fireplace, called out "HEADQUARTERS!" and he and Snuffles vanished in a blast of green fire.

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"Well! It is about time you showed yourself, young man!" the loving, caring tones of Molly Weasley declared as Harry was righting himself and Sirius reversed his Animagus form.

Harry ignored her as Sirius struggled with completing his human form. The dog nose just wouldn't go away. "Okay, so I guess I have a Dogfather instead of a Godfather." He quipped.

"Been a while since I've (bark) a dog that long." Sirius commented.

Tapping her foot and looking angry, Mrs. Weasley repeated herself and added "Professor Snape was here on an errand for Professor Dumbledore. He left furious at your lack of consideration."

"Its Christmas, who cares about bloody Snape?!" Harry retorted, with a laugh. He was too happy from Susan, Christmas, butterbeer, Susan, seeing his parents, Oh and did he mention Susan.

Anger building, she brought out her pointy finger and said "First, you will not take that tone with me, Harry Potter! Second, Professor Snape is a Hogwarts teacher and you will not speak of him so disrespectfully!! He will be here to speak to you at lunch!! Now, march yourself to bed!!"

"Now see here Molly!" Sirius began.

Harry overrode him angrily "Snivellus is a greasy haired git!! And you're not my mother!! So piss off!!"

"HOW DARE YOU!!" Mrs. Weasley roared.

Sirius got between them "Now, Harry, why don't you sit here for a bit. Molly, I think it would be best if you leave this alone." He said in a reasonable tone.

"How do you expect to maintain order if adults contradict one another?" she asked, disdainfully. "You (meaning Harry) upstairs now!"

"NO!" snapped Harry "I'M GONNA!--he paused and smirked, then "I am going to sit here and study the gift my wonderful girlfriend gave me."

Mrs. Weasley glared at Sirius and said accusingly "This is all your fault! Harry was a decent boy before he started associating with the likes of you. Now, Harry you will--"

"That's it!" Sirius cut her off. "I'll say if Harry does something that needs punishment! Not you!"

Refusing to back down, Mrs. Weasley sneered “And what qualifies you as a parent?”

“Funny...I was going to ask that about you.” Sirius shot back in a low, cold tone.

Mrs. Weasley’s hands flew to her throat. The dish she was holding dropped to the floor and split into three pieces.

Harry’s jaw dropped in reaction. Susan’s gift slipped unnoticed from his lap and he started laughing.

Giving Sirius a death glare, Mrs. Weasley threw her head back and walked out.

“Oh man...(snort)...Sirius...(snicker)... that was...(double snort)...brilliant!” Harry laughed.

Angry with himself, Sirius flopped down on the couch directly opposite him “No it wasn’t, Harry. It should never have gotten out of hand like that.” He grumbled.

“It’s all her fault.” Harry declared, seriously. “Well, if you really want someone to blame, I guess we should start with Ginny. I’m just glad no one else was around. It could’ve been a lot worse.”

Sirius nodded and replied “You’re probably right.”

“But, she still deserved it.” Harry commented “It’s not your fault you were locked up all that time. You were framed. What she said was mean. I’d rather’d grown up here than with the bloody Dursleys any day.”

Sirius wiped at a tear and laughed “Stop buttering the old man up.”

“Whatever you say, Dogfather.” Harry replied as he picked his book off the floor.

Sirius shook he head “Hmmm...disrespect to your elders...needs punishment I think.”

“Huh!” Harry’s head shot up.

Sirius nodded gravely “Fraid so. Just can’t have it. No, it must be done. Harry, I know how much you are looking forward to seeing your favorite Professor tomorrow. But, you’ll just have to suffer. I want you out of this house before 11.”

“Snape’s not my fav--” Harry began. Then he saw Sirius’ mouth curve in amusement “--Ohhh...oooo...Please Dogfather not that. I miss the greasy git.”

Sirius guffawed at his Godson’s response. “Too bad. That’s my decision.” He said, mock severely. Then he slapped the spot beside him and said “Now, come over here so we can look at that book together. It’s been a while since I’ve seen pictures of Lily and James. That’s quite a girl you got there.”

“Yeah, Sue’s amazing.” said Harry with a wistful tone.

“You were about to make a major confession when we came back in, weren’t you?” Sirius asked.

Harry blushed and looked away “What’re you talkin’bout?” he muttered. “You weren’t even in the room.”

“Doggie ears, my boy, doggie ears.” Sirius said jovially “Snuffles can hear a fly fart.”

Harry’s face twisted unpleasantly “That’s gross.” he declared.

“Don’t change the subject.” Sirius countered, gently. “That’s a pretty powerful trio of words.”

Harry gulped nervously and said “I know. But, it’s how I feel.”

“Then, I’m happy for you, and I’m sorry the moment got interrupted...bad timing.” Sirius replied.

Harry shrugged "S'alright. Still been the best Christmas ever. Happy Christmas, Sirius."

"You, too Harry. You, too." he replied, putting an arm around Harry's neck.

"Hey, did you hear something?" asked Harry.

Sirius waved it off "Nah, this old house has all kinds of creaks and groans."

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The noise Harry had heard was a creaky board being stepped on. Ginny hadn't completely shut her door when she turned in. So, she heard the very beginnings of the argument and had made her way downstairs to investigate.

The whole thing brought a range of emotions. Anger at her mother for defending Snape. As intensely as Ginny loathed Harry, she also hated Potions Professor. Apparently, more than she did Harry. And the big-nosed git had taken his anger at Harry not being present on everyone in the house, including her.

Harry blasting her mother was a completely different matter. He had NO RIGHT!

But, then Mum took a cheap shot at Sirius that was totally uncalled for. And Ginny liked him and pitied what the poor man had been through. Again, her temper flared when Harry sounded so amused at Sirius' retort.

Then Harry had to go and mention his miserable childhood. Which, despite everything he had said and done to her, always made Ginny feel bad. Then, they had to go and bring up HER. Susan's gift! Bones this! Bones that!

Ginny felt her upper lip curl as the conversation droned on. She grew angry with herself as she imagined looking just like Snape. That was

when she snuck away and back to her room. This time she shut the bedroom door tightly.

## 27 - A Nice Big Monkey Wrench

Breakfast was not a pleasant event. And that was an understatement. "BREAKFAST!" Molly shouted from the kitchen. "Your father will be out of St. Mungo's today. Charlie and Bill left earlier this morning."

"Morning, Mum." The twins said as they entered together "Mmmm! Smells good!"

Mrs. Weasley smiled at her children "Thank you, dears. Do grab plates." She then proceeded to fill Fred's, Ron's, George's and Ginny's in order. She then helped herself to the remaining eggs, toast and bacon and sat down. Immediately, the tension level in the kitchen spiked.

"Yeah, well, no problem." said Harry "I cooked for the Dursleys since I was five, I can do just as good a job as you can."

All the Weasley kids gasped, anticipating an explosion. The biggest surprise came when it didn't come.

"Fred, George I would like you both to reorganize the room for your father." Mrs. Weasley said. It was like everyone was in two different rooms "Ginny, Ron, please see to it that all our rooms are neat and tidy."

Ron groaned "But, Mum, I thought we could take our new brooms out for a spin!"

"It's alright, Ron." Harry put in "We got plenty of time, besides I'm going over to Sue's then we're both going to Hermione's."

Ron gave a disappointed nod and said "Oh, yeah, forgot. Look, about that...ahh...wish her a Happy Christmas for me, would ya."

"Sure, no problem." Harry replied

"So, Harry, wha'd'ya get our little brainiac?" asked George.

Fred interjected "Probably some book of spells, she'd want."



"Nope! Wrong! Does the Firebolt ring a bell?" Harry announced, very pleased with himself.

Ron gagged on a mouthful of sausage "But Her ...mione...hates to...fly!"

"We'll get her up there." Harry replied, forgetting for a moment. "Well, I will, anyway."

George commented "Could be fun though, two on a broom. Make sure Bones knows, though. Wouldn't want your bits frozen." Fred joined in snickering.

"No worries mate. Sue's not the over-jealous type." Harry shot back, jokingly.

Ginny threw her fork down. Picked up her half eaten plate, tossed it in the sink and walked out. And, the tension, which had eased slightly, went through the roof.

"Oops." Said George.

Harry shrugged and said "Not my problem. You want bacon, or sausage, Sirius?"

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A little after 10AM, breakfast was long cleaned up. Harry had just finished helping Ron with his room. "All without magic." He grunted.

"Thanks, mate. Guess as much as we hate'em the Dursleys taught you something." The redhead joked.

Harry gave a half amused snort and replied "Yay."

"So...you will tell her Happy Christmas for me...won't you?" asked Ron.

Harry nodded and replied "Of course, I will. How are you two going to get along now?"

"Go back to the way things were, before...I guess." Ron answered. "I wouldn't want what happened with you and Ginny to happen with us...I mean...who knows...Maybe...someday... Here...I did get her something."

Harry took the package with a defeated air and replied "Maybe you're right Ron." Harry stopped by Sirius' room, grabbed the large box containing Hermione's Firebolt and the boys headed downstairs.

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"...fy Professor Dumbledore!" the angry voice of Ron's mother reached the boys' ears.

"Harry doesn't have a lot of faith in Albus just now, and frankly I don't blame him." Sirius argued.

"And you're content to be led around by the nose by a child!" Molly yelled accusingly "May as well slap a leash on you and be done with it!"

Ron gaped at his mother. Harry was just disgusted "What the bloody hell's up your arse now?" he demanded.

"We'll take up your mouth later!" She snapped "Professor Snape is due here within the hour! And you are not to leave this house until he arrives!"

Harry started out furiously "YOU--" then bit his tongue, mostly because of Ron's presence, and turned to his Godfather "Wish you could come, too."

"Don't worry about me, kiddo." Sirius replied. His face took on a gleeful expression "I'll just have to offer your regrets to your favorite professor."

Harry assumed a Snape-like demeanor and said "Tell the greasy-haired git I'll make time for him tomorrow. Now get out of my sight before I deduct points, Black."

"Not...bad." Sirius managed before dissolving in laughter. Ron howled at the imitation.

"Ronald Weasley! If you have run out of things to do, I can certainly find more!" Mrs. Weasley exclaimed, in an effort to enforce some control.

Ron, fighting giggles first addressed Harry "See ya, mate." Then to his mother "Yes, Mum."

"#80 Norman Way!" Harry called out and vanished in a burst of green flame.

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Harry arrived to find an empty house. "Hellooooo!" he called out. After knocking on both the bathroom and Susan's room door, Harry went out through the kitchen door where he found the Bones women and Hannah Abbott.

At that moment Susan's sister happened to be on the ground. She ran over and hugged him tightly. "These brooms are awesome!" she said excitedly; her voice rather muffled due to her face being buried in Harry's stomach.

"Aww...you're welcome, Tina." Harry replied. Susan's mother was performing a slow (around 40MPH) Wronski Feint. Off to the left, and higher, Susan and Hannah were playing catch with a Quaffle.

Being fairly close to the ground, Joan Bones spotted Harry and coasted to a smooth landing. Her hair was in total disarray and she was giggling like a schoolgirl. She ran her fingers through her blond hair and briefly embraced Harry. "It's...been...a long time...since I did...that!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

"It was pretty good." He said.

She laughed, and lightly scolded him “Oh, please...I’m sure an active Seeker like you could do that at least twice as fast. But, full marks for shamelessly complementing your girlfriend’s mother.”

“Thanks.” Harry mumbled.

Dismounting, Joan handed the Firebolt to her daughter and said “That’s enough for me. Off you go. You might want to tell Suzy she has a visitor.”

“Yes ma’am!” The young girl exclaimed as she bounced onto the broom and streaked into the air. Tina very smoothly intercepted the flying Quaffle just as it touched Hannah’s outstretched fingers.

Harry whistled appreciatively and said “That was a pretty cool move.”

“I was a backup for Hufflepuff’s Seeker back in school.” Said Joan, reminiscently “Not quite good enough for the regular squad, but I played a few games. I suppose she gets it from me. Suzy, on the other hand, along with her red hair, got her Quidditch skills from Neil.”

Just then, Harry saw his girlfriend misjudge a throw by Tina, Susan was several feet to the right. He gave a curious look to Joan.

“Which is to say, none at all!” she concluded, laughing.

Tina swooped down, out of the sky, dropping sixty feet in a few seconds and snapped up the falling Quaffle before it hit the ground.

“PRAT!” yelled Susan at her sister “Why didn’t you tell me Harry was here!?” All three girls angled toward the pair on the ground.

Hannah landed with practiced ease, while Susan fought with her landing a greater distance away. The blond Hufflepuff approached him a little shyly and said “Uhh...thank you, Harry. I mean it. But...ahh...why? I’m not trying to sound ungrateful or anything...It’s just...it’s a lot and.....”

"I found out I have money." He replied "A lot of it. So I figured I'd blow some of it on Christmas."

Hannah hugged him, too, warmly. "Well, thanks." She said "Now I've gotta convince my parents to let me keep it."

"Are you quite done with my boyfriend, Abbott?" asked Susan, she sounded miffed.

Hannah laughed and countered "No! Thought I'd keep him for a while!"

"Uhh...Hannah..." Harry stammered.

Susan giggled at his panicked expression and said "Well, you'll let me know when you're done, then, right?"

"Tomorrow sound good?" Hannah suggested as she tightened her grip.

Susan poked her friend in the ribs and growled "Move it blondie!"

"EEEE!" Hannah squealed as she let go "THAT WAS RUDE!"

Susan wrapped her arms around Harry's neck and kissed him. Harry only rested his hands on Susan's waist and didn't try to deepen the kiss. And, to her surprise, he refused to when she made the attempt. She pulled away, with a confused look, and asked "Something wrong?"

"Uh-uh" Harry grunted, shaking his head.

Mrs. Bones chuckled lightly and said "Don't mind me, you two. I was a teenager once, too, you know."

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Much later in the day, the Grangers had taken the visiting couple out to their favorite Italian restaurant. For Harry, it was disturbingly close to the Dursleys' house. More than once, he glanced around. He kept

expecting to see one of them come lumbering in. Growing up in a Wizarding household, Susan had never tried pizza. Even with his childhood, Harry had done that. Susan suffered quite a bit of teasing. They got merciless when she said she didn't like it.

"It's that stringy stuff." She complained.

A waiter was quick to come over and offer assistance "So sorry, folks." He said.

"Could we possibly have one of your single helping pizzas? Hold the mozzarella?" Hermione's mother suggested.

"Yes, ma'am." And the waiter was off to the back.

Mr. Granger, finishing a piece of the large pie, addressed Harry "I can now truly understand what Hermione has been writing about you. To tell you the truth, I admire your restraint. In your place, I would've finished off that kid that attacked you."

"Thank you, sir." Harry replied, rather shortly. He didn't want to admit that during the fight at King's Crossing it was only Dean Thomas and Frank Bones pulling them apart that stopped him from strangling Seamus with his bare hands.

"I know we can't discuss your school too much outside, but I'm curious." Mr. Granger asked "How is it you've become something of a teacher? Even of students older than you?"

Avoiding any reference to magic, Harry replied "Well, we had one teacher who was friends with my Dad. I learned a lot from him and then I learned a lot of advanced stuff for that contest last year."

"Harry can beat any of us." Susan said with pride "Probably any three of us."

Blushing, he said "Aww...I'm not that good."

"You are, too." She declared "And it's bloody sexy when you're in charge."

Harry leaned into her ear and hissed "Cool it, Sue."

"So, let's see if I get this." Susan replied, amusedly "You can, and in front of forty people by the way, say I gotta great ass. But I can't--"

"Can't you--" Hermione began, about to scold them. But she stopped herself "--Nothing, forget it."

That led to the subject of Ron. Mrs. Granger was by far the most displeased of Hermione's parents "That weasel boy should be ashamed of himself." She grumbled "And especially at Christmas time."

"I don't think there's any good time." Harry said coldly, glaring at her "And you know his name is WEASLEY, not weasel."

Interjecting herself, Susan said "Harry please, Mrs. Granger... I'm sure we can just enjoy dinner." And, under the table, she gave Harry's leg a firm squeeze. She felt Harry rest his on hers and relaxed her grip. Hermione's mother switched her glare to her, but Susan only smiled pleasantly at the woman.

"You're right, of course, Susan." Mrs. Granger finally yielded. And Ron was dropped from the discussion for the rest of the meal.

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Back at Hermione's house, she asked "Can I talk to you, Harry? Alone...You don't mind, do you, Susan?"

Hermione lived in a well-to-do neighborhood just outside London's city limits. The houses were at least double the size of those on Privet Dr. Something, for all his bluster, Harry's uncle couldn't afford. But, what Harry liked most about the neighborhood was that, while the houses were similar they were not identical.

"Mr. Weasley's getting out of the hospital today." Harry said, skirting the edge of what was on his best friend's mind.

She smiled "That's good. You saved his life, you know." She led him outside to her porch and sat in a wicker rocking chair. A small electric heater warmed the spot where they sat.

Harry hopped up on the railing across from her "That's what everyone keeps telling me." he grumbled.

"You shouldn't feel guilty, Harry." She replied "You should feel glad."

Harry grimaced and said "I do, I'm glad he's fine. I just feel like...I dunno...Like I shoulda done more."

"I think you did everything you could." She said softly "You got to Professor Dum--"

Harry interrupted her with a sarcastic laugh "Dumbledore didn't care. He was more worried about some secret than Mr. Weasley's life!"

"I don't think that's true, Harry." She argued "But, I don't want to fight with you. I already lost one friend, I don't want to lose you too. Harry (sniffle) I just don't understand what happened!!"

Harry hesitated before responding "Well.I.., Ron didn't ACTUALLY say I shouldn't tell you what he told me. I tell you on two conditions."

Hermione looked up and nodded

"First, you can't tell him...just in case. And, second... remember...its what he said, OK?" After she agreed, he told her everything he could remember about his conversation with Ron.

Hermione listened avidly and after Harry was done, she bowed her head into her chest and cried "I...never knew--"

"That Ron was so sensitive?" he half-joked "Yeah, me neither."

Hermione made a wet sounding chuckle and glared at him, in defense of her ex-boyfriend, "That's not what I meant, Harry! What I do not get, is if...that is...why doesn't it bother you?"



"It does...sometimes." He admitted, hesitantly "But...the truth is...it feels like I have a mother."

Hermione's face went slack as she tried to get her mind around the rather bizarre comment "And...Ron already has one." She observed.

"And a right bitch she is, too." Harry declared.

She gave a cross look and said "Harry, you shouldn't -- I'm doing it again, aren't I?"

"Yup." Harry said with a nod.

Hermione smiled slightly. But, what she wanted to know was "What's Mrs. Weasley's problem now? Mr. Weasley's healed."

Harry explained "She keeps trying to make me see Snape."

"You will have to tell me more if I'm going to understand that statement, Harry." She replied.

Smirking, he did so "Snape was at HQ yesterday and got all pissed off I wasn't there. Mrs. Weasley told me he had something from Dumbledore and would be there at lunchtime today."

"So, what did he want?" asked Hermione.

Harry shrugged, his smirk widened "Dunno, left before he got there." He replied.

"HARRY! He's a teacher!" she exclaimed "You could get in trouble!"

He shot her an annoyed look and said "I get in trouble for breathing in Snape's class. It's MY Christmas vacation."

"Well...it's rude...Don't you think?" Hermione pointed out.

Harry crossed his arms and his frown deepened "And insulting my parents isn't? When hasn't he been rude to me? Ron? Neville?" he was relentless "Hell, I'll even side with Finnegan! What about you?"

Remember our very first class? OH! And what's his nickname for you?"

"Hermione?" Mr. Granger queried "You two got loud enough for us to hear. I think you had best come in." He stepped onto the porch and held the door open for the pair.

"Never a dull moment, is there, Harry?" Susan commented, half playfully.

Harry rolled his eyes and replied "Noticed that, did you?" He sat next to her and took the hand that wasn't holding a teacup.

"Mum, Dad, honestly...it's not a big deal." said Hermione in her most reasonable, logical, tone. She gave Harry a frustrated look.

Mrs. Granger ran her fingers through her hair and said "Now, Hermione, why don't you let us judge that. What has this professor been calling you?"

"No...I" Hermione's voice trailed off as she shot an angry look at Harry. Powerful and smart witch that she was, she couldn't hold out against her parents and finally answered, faintly "He calls me an Insufferable-Know-It-All."

Both Grangers quickly turned angry "Of all the in—" "That unmitigated ex—" stumbling over each other's words.

"Prick!" Mrs. Granger cursed

"No need for that, there are kids present!" Mr. Granger snapped.

Harry blinked as a sudden understanding dawned on him. He'd have to tell Ron about that.

"At any rate, we will be making an official protest with your Headmaster, Hermione." Her mother said. "Is there more we should know about this – person?"

Hermione shook her head, but Harry added “Actually, he’s also ignored Malfoy whenever he calls her names in class.”

“And I would assume, this – Malfoy – is a fellow student?” asked Mr. Granger. A nod from Harry led to him following up with “I suppose he says similar things.”

Now Hermione glared at him “Don’t you dare, Harry! I mean it!”

“He’s always calling her Mudblood.” Susan answered when Harry hesitated.

The Grangers shared a confused look. The word had no meaning for them. Hermione looked at the floor and didn’t speak.

“Mudblood’s a rude name for someone with Non-Magic parents.” said Harry, quoting Hermione’s own definition almost exactly.

Hard lines formed in Mr. Granger’s face “We don’t wish to seem rude hosts, but I think we’d like to discuss this with Hermione in private.”

“Gee! Will you look at the time!” Susan suddenly exclaimed “Didn’t know it was so late!” It was only 7:20. Which was what Harry was going to point out, but she tightened her grip on his hand. “Harry, you can floo back to my house and go home from there.”

The instant travel of the floo network made it irrelevant that Harry would be traveling from a point just outside London, all the way to the Isle of Wight, then to Sirius’ house – which was in London.

The Grangers said warm goodbyes to the young couple. Harry and Susan thanked Hermione’s parents for dinner. Hermione herself was a little disgruntled at the pending conversation with her parents, so she was a bit clipped in her goodbyes. But, she did thank Harry again for the Firebolt.

After the green glow faded from their fireplace, Mrs. Granger turned to her daughter and began “Now, dear, I want you to know we are not angry with you. But, why wouldn’t you come to us if you were having problems in school?”

“Tell us everything.” Her father ordered. Hermione sighed; she was in for a long night.

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Harry was in bed with Susan. Her full breasts were bare and in his face. He fondled, kissed and licked them all over. Susan moaned pleurably. After a few minutes, she slid down, kissed him deeply and flicked her finger across his shirt, which promptly parted. Harry sighed as she kissed her way down his chest to his stomach. She snapped her fingers and his pants vanished. Harry groaned her name as she slipped her hand into his shorts....

....Harry woke up spluttering and spitting water out. The next thing he realized, he was hugging a pillow “Bloody Weasley twits!” he shouted as he blindly sought his wand.

“I have your wand, Potter.” The cold, harsh voice of Professor Snape informed him. “Be downstairs in three minutes or I will snap it! And be dressed, I have no time for your puerile displays!”

Harry’s eyes flew open, just in time to see his billowing black robes exiting the room. Furious, he jumped out of bed in pursuit -- and froze -- except for underwear he was naked. And, thanks to what he now realized was a dream, stiffly erect. Burning with humiliation, Harry threw on clothes and stomped down the stairs.

“Took you long enough, Pott--“ Snape began.

Harry cut him off “Gimme my wand! And if you ever--”

“Now you listen here!” Mrs. Weasley’s shout overrode his.

Harry fixed her with a look of hatred and screamed “SHUT UP!” He smiled maliciously as the Weasley matriarch began to inflate like a balloon.

“Sorry, mate.” Ron muttered before slapping Harry across the face.

His concentration broken, Harry's magic dispersed and Mrs. Weasley crashed to the floor, the twins rushed to help her to her feet.

"You listen to me you inconsiderate, ungrateful, arrogant brat!" Snape gritted out between clenched teeth. He grabbed a fistful of Harry's shirt and pulled him close. "The Headmaster assigned me to teach you Occulumency. Your first lesson will be after classes. And you will be serving two weeks detention for avoiding me and forcing me to come to this hole three separate times!"

Harry pushed the black-clad professor away and tore free of his grip. Where's my accidental magic now? A small voice in the back of his head wondered. "Touch me again and you'll regret it!" he snarled.

"Do not test me, Potter!" Snape replied menacingly.

Sirius got between them "You would be safer out of here, Snivellus."

"Just as you're safe in here...protected...while everyone else risks life and limb...mutt." Snape sneered.

The taunt bit deeply. Ashamed, Sirius backed down.

The group witnessed that very rare sight – a Snape smile. It lasted for five seconds, then disappeared. The Potion Master disappeared moments later.

"I really hate that bloody bastard!" exclaimed Ron.

Having righted herself, Mrs. Weasley lectured him "Ronald Weasley! How many times have I told you? I forbid cursing!!"

"HAHA!! That's too funny!!" Harry burst out laughing. He found it completely ridiculous that that was her chief worry. He fell into a chair, and subsequently onto the floor.

Ron faced his mother, uncomfortably. Then he looked at his best friend, who was apparently completely loony, rolling around on Sirius' kitchen floor. From Ron's perspective, the only good thing was that

Harry had seemingly forgotten about being slapped. "Err...mate...you alright?" he asked, hesitantly.

Harry stopped laughing for a moment. Looked up at his friend, chortled, snorted and was off again.

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New Years Day meant the holidays were almost over. But Harry somehow couldn't summon any sadness about returning to Hogwarts. He just didn't share Ron's grumbling view of the place. And, besides, he'd had way too good a holiday.

Ron's mood was miserable that morning. He was furious, though not at Harry, but his mother. On the 28th he'd quietly told his father that Harry had invited him to Susan's for the day. It had been a golden opportunity to get in some flying time with the Firebolt Harry had given him. Knowing his mother would've refused, the boys slipped out early in the morning. Ron loved it, basking in the attention showered on him by Susan's younger sister. He was only too happy to offer Quidditch pointers in exchange for a few worshipful looks. That Hannah Abbott chatted him up did no harm, either. The return to Grimmauld Place, at nearly midnight, to an enraged mother who punished him for the rest of the holidays, brought him crashing down.

Sirius had turned into a dog and was looking forward to the freedom of the outdoors that the Bones house offered, even if it was in his Animagus form.

"Snuffle-poo misses his girlfriend." Harry teased his Godfather.

The dog twisted his head slightly, giving him a pose of curiosity. Ron echoed it, asking "Huh? Who?"

"Snuffles has a thing for licking Tina's face." Harry replied. To which Ron burst out laughing.

The dog took Harry out at the knees, pounced on his chest and snarled.

“Alright, alright!” the pinned boy giggled “I give, I give!”

Ron, laughing, offered a hand and pulled him back to his feet. Then, like a rock falling, Ron’s mood changed “Wish I could go. Hell, I’d even play chess with Ginny, but she’s off with Finnegan!”

“You’ll serve your punishment and like it, Ronald Weasley!” his mother said, making an appearance “Unlike you, Ginny has earned her time to enjoy the holiday.”

Sullenly, Ron replied “Yeah, off with the git!”

“Watch yourself.” Mrs. Weasley warned her son, then turned on Harry. “Off again? And what do you expect I’ll do if you’re needed here again?”

That night Ron was there, the group had watched Harry and Susan’s favorite Muggle movie. Ron had wondered if the lead character knew the Twins. Harry baited her with a perfect line “Tell Snape, or Dumbledore for that matter, that I’m out on personal business.”

“What, pray tell, is that supposed to mean?” she asked, falling for it. Ron wanted to curl into a ball.

Harry grinned, not pleasantly, and replied “It means...that it’s personal and ... none of their business....Or yours... Mrs. Weasley.”

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“I want to say how rude that was.” Susan’s mother said, after Harry told the Bones about the incident. She was desperately fighting not to laugh.

Neil Bones’ laughter boomed across the room “Oh, come on Joanie” he nudged his wife. “The rotten woman deserved it!”

“Harry, I must say, keeping your personal business your own...is....well...very wise.” Amelia Bones said. Her voice was full of mirth. “So, Harry, I believe we can flush out your so-called protectors and protect your interests at the same time. Shall we be off?”

Harry nodded and said "Let's." This time Madam Bones offered no objection, not even the standard, to his inclusion of Susan.

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"Yes?" said the Goblin teller. He was honestly surprised at humans appearing on their New Years Day.

Stepping forward, the young wizard said "I am Harry Potter. I have need of access to my trust vault."

"And do you have your key, Harry Potter?" the teller asked.

Seizing the offensive, Harry replied "It'd be a waste of time if I didn't, wouldn't it?"

"Griphook!" the teller called out. He smirked at the young wizard.

Thinking of his first visit, Harry said "Good to see you again."

"You remember me?" asked Griphook. Both Goblins smiled.

"Of course, I don't think I'll ever forget my first visit here." replied Harry.

Griphook's last visit to the Potter Trust Vault had been decidedly unpleasant. He was also honor-bound to comply with the arrangements Gringotts had made over a decade ago, now. That didn't mean he couldn't offer a suggestion or two to the true owner.

"It is our understanding that Mr. Potter's trust vault is replenished from the Family Vault on the first of the New Year. That is correct?" Amelia asked.

Looking at Harry, Griphook replied "Your information is correct and the Trust is full as of the opening of business. Only the 100 Galleon annual fee has been deducted."



"I've got a few bills to pay." Harry said as the cart arrived in front of Vault #187.

The Goblin stepped out and said "Key please!"

"I like this." Harry said. "Reminds me of a Muggle roller coaster. Just wish we could go faster."

Griphook grinned delightedly at the innocent observation "That was only number two, Mr. Potter. Our cars go up to five, safely."

"Wha'd'ya think? Sue? Madam Bones?" asked Harry, he looked eager.

Susan nodded as well. There was just a touch of brightness in Amelia's expression "I must admit to a little curiosity."

"Most of your kind disapproves of what they call recklessness." said the young Goblin. Griphook's respect for this trio of humans had moved up several points.

Madam Bones stood ramrod straight and said "Master Goblin, I am not like most of what you call my kind. What they don't know, won't hurt them."

"It shall be done." replied a pleased Griphook "Now! To business." He swung the vault door open to reveal stacks and stacks of coins. The newly transferred funds packed the vault to capacity. The perfectly even tops of the piles was only marred by one stack being about half drained to cover the annual fee.

"And all this gets emptied every year?" an awed Susan asked. On Harry's behalf, she was deeply offended by what had been discovered by Ron's accountant cousin. But, only now did the scope of the crime set in.

"What, Mr. Potter, can Gringotts do for you?" asked Griphook.

Harry, too, had felt the urge to blow his temper, but Susan's hand in his kept him calm. "First thing, here is a bill for services from Weasley Accounting for 2000 Galleons. Pay that to Vault #1492."

"Yes, sir." The Goblin acknowledged

"Also, Mr. Weasley is my new Financial Advisor. He will be receiving the monthly payment." Harry added "My previous advisor was both negligent and incompetent, he or she is terminated."

Griphook gaped at the young wizard. His uncle had discussed the Potter matter with him in great detail before his ...reassignment... Griphook decided to take a risk. One that could easily result in his own ...reassignment... "Mr. Potter, you know we are trapped in a difficult position--" he began

"I'm getting bloody sick and ti--" Harry's voice rose to a shout

Madam Bones squeezed his shoulder and suggested "Why don't we hear what our escort has to say?"

"My thanks, Lady." Griphook said. "I cannot tell you who either the advisor or executor are, Mr. Potter. But, I can tell you that they are one in the same."

That was highly revealing and, to someone of Amelia's caliber, an indication of willingness to offer more "Master Goblin, have you a suggestion?" she asked.

"First, might we finish with Mr. Potter's transactions?" he requested with a toothy grin.

Harry went ahead and paid his Hogwarts tuition for the second term, and for Madam Bones' services plus a substantial advance for future expenses. All told, more than twenty thousand Galleons was being carted away from Harry's trust vault.

Susan couldn't quite help gaping at the vast treasure. Her father might handle large sums for his company, but it was outside her experience. "That's a bloody awful lotta money!" she exclaimed.

"I'd trade it all for one hug from my parents." Harry said sadly.

Griphook fell to the cold stone floor in front of the vault door at the casual remark.

The Bones women neatly divided the labor. Amelia bent down and assisted the Goblin to his feet.

Susan wrapped her arms around Harry and pulled his head into her shoulder. "Go ahead and cry if you want." She whispered.

"No." said Harry in a choked up voice. He pulled his head up and added "That was stupid...Ahh...Madam Bones...what happened to Griphook?"

Amelia looked up from her crouch and replied "Goblins take money matters very seriously. I think you broke our guide." Her voice and eyes somehow held equal parts of amusement and sympathy.

"At any rate, back to business." Griphook declared, trying to recover his dignity "Now, I have told you all that I can, and more, given the terms of the Arrangement. When Mr. Potter comes of age, it lapses. But in the meantime, I would point out that your parents' will states that the executor has free access to Vault One-Eight-Seven."

Harry looked very displeased "So we wasted--"

"Hush, Harry." Susan said gently "Look at Auntie."

Madam Bones was grinning and nodding. "Your thoughts echo my own, Master Goblin." She said "Please arrange to have the contents of this vault moved to a new one -- Ahh-- assuming you have no objections, Harry."

"No." he replied automatically. "But --umm-- I don't understand. What does that do?"

From her years of visiting with her Auntie, Susan got it "Your parents' will says which vault your executor can access, Harry." She explained

"If you get a new vault and move all the money into it whoever's been stealing your money won't be able to."

"Brilliant! Do it!" Harry exclaimed. "But...hmmm...one thing missing." That was when a coin happened to bounce out of one of the carts the Goblins were using. The Goblin picked it up, naturally. But, Harry's expression turned sneaky. He addressed the Goblin "Griphook, I was wondering, could you make sure to leave a Knut behind?"

Susan looked at Amelia and asked "Auntie, can I have a quill and some parchment?" She didn't have the same gift for pranking that Fred and George Weasley had, or her sister's for that matter. But, when motivated she could be sneaky. Her humor was more subtle.

"What are you up to, young lady?" Amelia asked of her niece.

Susan scratched briefly on the parchment, walked over to the vault and plucked out a single bronze coin. She asked "You mind, Harry?"

"Nope." He replied, giving her a curious look.

"A sticking charm, Auntie." She asked, offering her boyfriend a wink.

Amelia took the parchment and the coin and read it "There is a misspelling here, my dear." She commented, bemusedly.

"I know." Susan replied, then to Harry she said "Sign it."

Harry's eyebrows shot up and he emitted an amused snort "I love it!" he exclaimed. Harry signed it and handing the parchment to the Goblin, requested "Griphook, please make sure they see this letter."

"With pleasure, Mr. Harry Potter." Griphook replied with a feral grin. The letter fit in very well with the Goblin definition of justice.

To Whom It May Concern:

**KNOT ANOTHER KNUT!!**

Harry James Potter

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Griphook stuck the letter to the inside panel, tapped the vault door and it swung shut. After escorting the humans to the exit, Griphook reported to his superior everything that had occurred.

“You do recognize the violation, do you not young one?” the senior Goblin said harshly in Gobbledygook.

Griphook stood tall and replied “Of course I do. That agreement was against both our depositor’s and the institution’s best interest, sir. My disclosure will hopefully work to heal the breach.”

“A gamble. But, you might be correct. You might even be rewarded at a future date.” the senior Goblin commented. Then harshly added “As for your breach...three lashes. And as further punishment...you will not be allowed to escort the Potter executor to the vaults. Your pay will be suspended that day.”

Griphook nodded his acceptance and said “Understood, superior sir.” The lightness of his sentence meant that his superior actually approved. Griphook kept his silence and departed.

## 28 – Back to School

The halls of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was again full of its army of eleven to eighteen year olds.

Harry was sullen and cold to Professor McGonagall through most of the detentions he and his girlfriend served with his Head of House. By the end of the two weeks, though, he had softened somewhat. The couple had had more than one conversation about it. "I still hate it when Umbitch thinks she wins." he complains.

"Its not too bad, really." Susan countered, her voice playful and a little husky. She leaned over in her desk, squeezed Harry's thigh and kissed his neck just under his ear.

On January 6th Madam Bones' group of observers, Professor Dumbledore, and High Inquisitor Umbridge were absent from the school. All of them were attending a session of the Wizengamot. They were still absent the next two days. And Madam Bones didn't return for nearly a week. However, the session was open to the public and the Daily Prophet provided an account.

### CHAOS IN COURT

By: Marcus Flint

Today, the Wizengamot was thrown into disarray by what is only a preliminary report by the Bones Commission. So named for the head and prime mover of a group of observers sent to Hogwarts to investigate allegations of irregularities at the school.

First, the group itself suffers from serious internal disputes. Among its members, the quite ancient Gideon Prewett found fault with long-serving Potion Master Severus Snape. As a recent graduate, I must say this does not sit well with me. I only made even acceptable on my Potions OWL due to Professor Snape donating his own time to assist me. My sources tell me that Mr. Prewett --- with all due respect --- has either had his judgment clouded by his descendant Weasleys, all of whom have long shown disrespect for the rules. Another, more

sensitive, possibility suggested was that Mr. Prewett is ----well, past his prime.

Xenophilus Lovegood, who was proclaimed a prominent member of our community when appointed by Madam Bones, is at best, a minor celebrity also leveled complaints against Professor Snape. Sources which wish to remain anonymous speculate his accusations come from his daughter, Luna. The 14-year old has, however, long had an unfortunate reputation as being bizarre. It is certainly forgivable given the trauma of the tragedy that she suffered as a young girl. However, for a supposed newsman to escalate those allegations to the Wizengamot is at least irresponsible. Even if he runs a fringe --- I hesitate to use the word news ---- paper.

Next, we come to Lucius Malfoy. Except for a brief period, a member of the Hogwarts' Board of Governors for more than two decades. Additionally, a significant contributor to many noble charity works. A man truly in a position to understand the workings of the school. Mr. Malfoy provided a greatly detailed report, nearly a diary of his experiences. At times, even I admit, a little tedious. But, he offered only minimal recommendations. His sole complaint was noting the return of Rubeus Hagrid to the position of Professor for Care of Magical Creatures. Completely understandable in light of the life-threatening injury suffered by then 12-year old Draco.

Finally, Amelia Bones' report was silent on the matter of Professor Snape. When questioned, she merely stated she was inconclusive at present. However, her recent close association with Harry Potter (another notable trouble-maker) raises questions about any negative remarks she may make. Madam Bones clearly has a vendetta against our Senior Undersecretary. Madam Umbridge's prosecution of the criminal case against her niece seems to be the basis for tension between the two most powerful witches. Perhaps understandable on a personal level, but it should not be allowed to interfere with the people's business.

At the conclusion of Madam Bones' report, Albus Dumbledore who is, as we all know, both Headmaster of Hogwarts and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, stated that he would take the findings under advisement.

Following Dumbledore's speech, Bones proposed that the Wizengamot remove Undersecretary Umbridge from her post as Hogwarts High Inquisitor. Her grounds were misuse of power. The bill passed by a margin of 27 – 20. Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge vetoed the bill. An override vote fell short of the needed 35.

Passing by 36 – 9 was a new law. Bones now has authority to override decisions made by the High Inquisitor. Minister Fudge signed the law without comment. Facing a veto-proof majority, the law would have been enacted, regardless.

This reporter senses a growing divide in our government. Perhaps both sides should sit down and discuss a reasonable solution. Or is one side refusing to make an accommodation. Time --- as they say --- will tell.

"That—that—rat bastard!" Ron had exclaimed when he'd barely gotten half way through.

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Ginny was officially added to the Defense League at a meeting the second Friday after school began. The vote was not unanimous. Most of Gryffindor voted in favor of her inclusion. Feeling bound, Harry did; the Weasley boys did; Hermione did not, spoke out and swayed several girls.

The Creevey brothers sided with the Patil girls, voting no.

"The way I see it, Weasley can owe me one." Daphne said, as the Slytherin contingent voted yes.

Michael Corner, who was known to have a crush on Ginny voted in favor. So did Luna Lovegood, who was Ginny's friend. "It will give a chance to see Ginny more." She said "We have not talked much lately."

"I know you agreed, Harry, but I just don't trust her." Said Susan "I'm sorry, I say no." All but two Hufflepuffs voted with Susan.



Ginny passed 23 – 15. Since returning to school, there had been a shift in her relationships. Her inclusion in the DL meant she was spending much less time with her roommates. She seemed to be making a real effort with Luna. The blond Ravenclaw had simply accepted Ginny back into her life.

Like Harry did with Hufflepuff, Ginny began sitting at the Ravenclaw table.

Seamus went along reluctantly. At every opportunity, he steered his girlfriend to the Gryffindor table.

Neville Longbottom found the situation a little odd. The tangle of relationships was confusing. He'd resented Harry beating him to asking Ginny to the Yule Ball last year. Then, he'd been disgusted by Ginny betraying Harry so openly. And now that he was good friends with Harry, his girlfriend was now best friends with her. Neville felt, in a word, ---Awkward!

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After some initial discomfort, things had gone along fairly smoothly in the DL. Ginny was mostly accepted into the group and at least tolerated by the ones who'd opposed her inclusion. Harry treated her indifferently. He looked at her as little as possible and, if she asked something, he replied as briefly as possible. The two red haired girls avoided each other like they were diseases.

Tensions had risen by March, though. The couple was sitting on a window sill in the Hufflepuff Common Room. Susan was snuggled back against Harry, who was reading her Wizzarding Government textbook over her shoulder.

"Everything's ready for tomorrow night's DL." He whispered in her ear.

Susan nodded, then took up her problem "I'm a little sick of her snide remarks, Harry."

"I know." He sighed. "It's like she's two people---Sometimes she's OK...others, she'll have this cold, empty look."

Susan made an impatient sound and said "I only get one, the nasty one. I think I was happier when we didn't know she wasn't involved in that attack. At least then, she wasn't around so much."

"I think its time I had a little chat with her." Said Harry.

Susan grumbled slightly and pointed out "I can fight my own battles."

"Yeah, you're not bad." He replied lightly. He grunted in response to Susan poking him, then continued "Look, that contract makes me the teacher, so it's my problem."

Susan nodded reluctantly and said "Fine...but if that don't work...pair us up for some dueling."

"Now...let's talk about you poking me." Harry whispered in her ear.

Pretending to ignore him, Susan read from the textbook "...Aurors are permitted the use of Unf---"

"Already read that." Harry growled in her ear, then nibbled at it.

Walking up to them, at that moment, Hannah complained "You two need to get a room."

"And you, my friend, could use a new boyfriend." Replied Susan. "Then you won't interrupt my snogging sessions."

The blond Hufflepuff shrugged "Not much interested" she grumbled. The long-distance aspect had been too much for the relationship. Hannah's Muggle boyfriend had broken up with her.

"Come on, Hannah." Susan pleaded "It's been over a month."

Hannah's eyes narrowed. She snapped "What part of no don't you understand?" and walked off.

"I'm gonna go talk to her." Said Susan, as she hopped off the windowsill.

Harry grumbled "No snog after all, huh?"

"You'll live." Susan countered.

Harry retorted "Yeah, but will you?" He tugged on her robes and grabbed her hips.

"A little big-headed there?" she asked, teasingly, as she ran both her hands through his hair.

He grinned and shrugged "Don't leave me alone." He pouted.

"Page 275 to 300." She told him with a giggle. Then she kissed him deeply and departed.

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What Harry had learned about teaching, (he'd been at it since the middle of First Term), was that varying activities kept the group from getting bored. That next evening, the DL meeting was about shield strengthening.

"Thought you said the best way not to get hit was not be there." Hufflepuff's Seeker commented.

The group rippled with amusement.

Every once in a while, Harry pulled out his Snape imitation "Perhaps, Cadwallader, I should test your shield." He sneered. Then, pulling his wand, he froze the Third Year's feet to the floor with "Pecto-Petrificus"

"Hey!" yelled Ben. Instead of a shield, though, the boy threw an "Expelliarmus" at Harry.

Harry was free to move and dodged to the side. He countered with an itching curse, that was dead on target.

Ben had to put up a shield “Portego!”

Harry blasted it twice more before it collapsed, then immediately lowered his wand “In a duel, you’ve got to be able to shield yourself when you can’t dodge. Good job, Ben. Ten points for Hufflepuff. Finite!”

“Some warning woulda been nice!” the Third Year grumbled as he shook the numbness from his feet. “And stop awarding points!! They’re not real!!”

Harry shrugged and mischievously replied “Nahh...no fun it that.” He saw Ben’s wand twitch. And put up his own shield. This time, he didn’t try to move. The younger boy was panting after his sixth curse. Harry’s shield still looked completely solid. Harry let his shield dissolve and said “Right, pair up.”

Hermione had paired with Zacharias Smith, she’d been leaning toward the Ravenclaw since she and Ron split up. After three months, the pair still rarely spoke.

Ron, on the other hand, had followed Harry’s lead and gravitated towards the Hufflepuffs. He liked the attentions from the mostly female Quidditch team. On this occasion, though, his partner was Hannah Abbott.

“Robbed, of my best friend” as Susan had put it, jokingly, she too had a Slytherin partner.

An eye-popping pairing, when it first happened, had been George Weasley and Daphne Greengrass. Now, the group was rather used to seeing it.

Ginny, further down the line, found herself once again opposite a persistent, pesky, Ravenclaw. “Come on, Corner! How’s that supposed to test my shield!” she complained.

“But, I don’t want to hurt you.” He said plaintively.

She rolled her eyes and growled “No chance with shots like that! Fine! Put yours up! I’ll show you how its done!” Her forth hex collapsed Michael’s shield and backed him into a wall.

“And...please...be careful.” Harry cautioned, not directly addressing his former girlfriend “We’re not dueling, here. We’re trying to strengthen our shields. Putting people through walls won’t do any good.”

Ginny snorted disgustedly, muttered something about Michael’s manhood (causing the Ravenclaw to blush)

“We don’t tolerate insults in the DL, Weasley!” said Harry in a purely Snape-like tone.

The entire room stopped. There was a difference. He wasn’t jokingly imitating the Potions Professor.

Ginny returned the baleful glare and fired her Bat-Bogey Hex. Harry didn’t think, he moved. In so doing the spell raced toward Susan, who, luckily managed to put up a shield. Hannah Abbott, forgetting her wand, charged at Ginny from behind. But, Ron, who was her partner, restrained her. Quidditch Keeping had given Ron a solid set of arms. And, with hers pinned, Hannah only exhausted herself in his grip.

“I don’t want to fight you.” Said Hermione in a no-nonsense tone. She was standing nose-to-nose with Ginny, wand drawn.

The redhead backed down. “Right, Hermione.” She said. The older girl was one of the few true friends she had in the DL, and that wasn’t all that solid.

“Maybe now would be a good time to call it a night.” Hermione suggested.

Harry nodded, but he was glaring at Ginny. “All except you, that is!” he growled.

“Problem, Potter?” she replied sarcastically. Over the last few months, her hate for Harry had faded. But, no one talked to her like that.

An angry Susan jumped in “You wanna go, Weaselette!” she said, wand at the ready.

“Any time, slag!” Ginny countered. She was instantly in a dueling stance. She spun her wand and began “Chi-“

In the same motion, Harry blocked his girlfriend’s path and disarmed his ex. The only ones still in the room were Hannah, Hermione and the Weasley boys. “Stop!” he commanded “Accio wand!” And Ginny’s wand flew into his grip.

“Harry, we---” Fred began.

Tossing Ginny’s wand at them, he said “Look, everyone agreed I was in charge.”

“But---” George tried to interrupt.

Harry spoke over him too “And, I agreed to treat everyone the same. Have I?”

“Yea” “Uh-huh” and nods were the responses. Even Ginny didn’t dispute it.

“I’ll prove it.” He said, and turning to his girlfriend “Here, Sue, you hold my wand.”

Susan’s eyebrows shot up “Exactly how do you mean that, Harry?” she asked.

“Huh?” he replied. Then he blushed and rolled his eyes “SUUUE! Not --- ”

Susan giggled “Couldn’t help it.” She offered her hand.

In response, Harry gripped hers with his wand hand, squeezed it, and when he let go he pushed his wand into her hand. “I’ll handle this.” He said softly.

“Of course you will.” Susan replied. She couldn’t resist taunting Ginny. “See how much --- MY --- boyfriend trusts me?” she sneered “Does yours?”

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In the Hall outside the Room of Requirement, Susan noticed an odd expression on her best friend’s face. One she hadn’t seen in a while. “What’s got you all worked up?” she asked “Or is it a who?”

“Not now!” Hannah whispered in her ear.

“I assume you are talking about Ron.” commented Hermione in a flat tone.

Hannah nodded, looking sheepish. “Sorry, Hermione... But yeah.”

“Figures.” She replied with a sour laugh. “Well, he could do a lot worse. I think I’ll listen at the door...make sure those two don’t kill each other.”

Hannah did feel bad “Honest...Suz...I didn’t plan on it. But...Merlin’s Beard!...Keeping works wonders on the arms!”

“I really don’t need you to go all gooey over Frank again.” Susan complained.

“I really liked it.” Hannah grinned happily “They’re like steel. I could tell he wasn’t even really trying.”

Susan rolled her eyes.

Meanwhile, Hermione strained her ears to hear Harry and Ginny.

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“What’s your problem?” snapped Harry. “Corner’s right enough.”

Ginny frowned and fired back “I don’t have to explain myself to you!”

“And I don’t have to put up with you!” he retorted. “You’re just lucky he didn’t get hurt! And while we’re on it...you’re lucky Susan was fast with her shield!”

Ginny dismissed that with a wave “And you know, maybe I’d have an easier time if you let ---MY --- boyfriend in.”

“Forget it!” he growled “I’m not teaching him squat! Next thing I know, my back’ll be turned --- and, well --- I don’t trust him!”

Ginny gave a highly doubting look and asked “You trust me?” It was a minor opening.

“Not really.” Harry said coldly. He either didn’t see it or didn’t care. “It was mostly because of Ron, Fred and George.”

Ginny immediately turned angry “I am sick and bloody tired of being treated like just a little sister!”

“Not my problem. If it wasn’t for them you’d be nothing at all.” He countered contemptuously “Now, the other thing I wanted to tell you was stop those cheap shots at Susan.”

Ginny’s expression hardened and her chin went up defiantly “Don’t know what you’re talking about, Potter. Besides, what makes her so special anyway?”

“She’s better than you in a million ways.” Harry replied, unknowingly hitting on something similar that Ginny had said about him to Seamus. “Mostly, none of your business. But, at least she never said she was glad my parents are dead.”

Ginny’s shoulders slumped and her anger evaporated. “I’ve never been proud of that, Harry.” She said softly “I don’t even know why I said it. I just hated you so much.”

“Yeah, well---“ Harry started to reply. But he suddenly couldn’t concentrate. He heard the buzz of voices in his head. After a moment, he could think clearly again. He focused on where she was standing.



Ginny approached and reached out “Harry? What’s wrong? Can I help?” she asked.

“GET AWAY!” he snarled at the hideous thing that filled his vision. He grunted in pain and squeezed his head with his fists. Harry fell to his knees and screamed in anguish. He thrashed around violently. By the time his shouts brought help, he was curled into a fetal position, and sobbing over and over again “Someone shut them up, please...It hurts...”

Hannah, with her passion for Potions, which was closely related to Healing, reacted fastest. She stunned and paralyzed the suffering boy. “We have to get him to Madam Pomfrey, now.” She said peremptorily, ignoring the shocked looks of everyone around.

“Ohhhhhh!” wailed Harry.

They all gaped at the sudden burst of magic that shattered Hannah’s spell. Susan utterly forgot about her rage at Ginny, who she’d thought caused his suffering, knelt beside Harry and pulled his head into her lap. “Shh...Harry...” she said soothingly, gently stroking his face. She repeated it over and over again.

“We could levitate Harry, then just guide him to the hospital wing.” Hermione suggested. “I can remember that from when I was petrified.”

Ginny offered to help, but the moment Hermione handed over her wand, she was thrown out of the room. Susan found that funny “That’s ok, Harry” she said softly “I feel the same.”

Harry still suffered, despite Susan’s ministrations, but he seemed in somewhat less agony. The group encountered no students as curfew was approaching, but they did run into a patrolling professor.

“A whole group, out after hours.” Snape sneered.

Harry cried out at the sudden stoppage.

Hermione stepped forward to confront the Potions Master “Please, sir!” she said “We are trying to get Harry to the Hospital Wing. There is something wrong with him!”

“I will make that determination, Miss Granger.” He said, slowly, deliberately. “That will be a week’s detention and twenty-five points from Gryffindor. Potter loves to over-dramatize every little ache and---”

Susan trained her wand on him. The closer she’d gotten to Harry, the worse Professor Snape treated her. Between them, the couple had lost as many House Points as half of the rest of the school combined. Harry’s detention total already exceeded Fred and George’s for all seven years, and Susan’s pace was accelerating rapidly. Loathingly, she said “Get out of the way or I’ll blast you through the wall!”

Snape whipped his wand out in response “YOU DARE THREATEN ME YOU PATHE---“

It was as far as he got. Susan had released her grip on Harry and moved her body protectively between him and the Potions Professor. But she never did a thing. Raw magic lashed out from Harry and struck Snape dead center in the chest. He flew down the otherwise deserted hall and skidded to a halt.

“Bonesie rocks!!” Fred and George cheered.

Susan shook her head “It ...ahh... wasn’t me. Somehow Harry did it.”

“We’ll get him later.” Hannah declared “Harry’s first.”

Ron didn’t even try not to laugh “Bout time he got what was coming to him. Like your thinking, Hannah.”

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In the few minutes it took the students to get Harry to the Hospital Wing, his condition had deteriorated. Harry alternated between screaming and whimpering. The only sign he was even vaguely

aware of his surroundings was the death-grip he had on Susan's hand.

"Well, let go! Girl!" ordered Madam Pomfrey, impatiently.

Susan snapped at her "Don't you think I've tried! My fingers are numb!"

"I can only think of one thing under the circumstances." The Medi-witch said, as she ran over to a storage cabinet. She grabbed a vial, hurried back and barked orders at them "Right! Hold his arms and legs! Tilt his head! Open his mouth!"

Immediately, Harry stopped moving and went completely limp.

"That's wonderful!" said Hermione "Why didn't you do that in the first place?"

Tears fell down Madam Pomfrey's cheeks "No." she said sadly "I did something horrible. But I did the only thing I could."

Hannah took the vial out of her hand and read the inscription Draught of Living Death.

"YOU KILLED HARRY!!" Ron bellowed, flying into a rage. He attacked the distressed Medi-witch. He might have killed her had his brothers not pulled him off. As it was, her lip was split and her left eye was swelling shut.

"Mr. Weasley, I assure you Madam Pomfrey only acted in what she believes is in the best interests of her patient." said the soothing voice of Albus Dumbledore as he entered. He was trailed by several people.

Ron almost tore himself free of Fred and George. He did manage to get one arm loose. Pointing at her, he yelled, accusingly "SHE'S WORKING FOR YOU-KNOW-WHO!!"

"Calm yourself Mr. Weasley!" Professor McGonagall ordered, as she assisted Poppy to her feet "Are you all right?"

Madam Pomfrey nodded "No harm done. Lost my footing, is all."

"LIAR!!" Ron roared, still struggling against his brothers "SHE POISONED HARRY!!"

"I can assure all of you," Dumbledore addressed the group calmly "That Madam Pomfrey would never support Lord Voldemort. She has my complete trust. Now, please, allow her to examine---"

Ron cut him off at that point "Over my dead body!"

"I agree with Ron." said Hermione as she drew her wand. It was only seconds before all the students were aiming wands.

"Such an accusation is very serious." Madam Bones said "What proof do you have?"

Susan tossed the vial over to her "Here, Auntie."

"Unless you can justify this, you are under arrest." She addressed the Medi-witch. Amelia was every bit the Head of Magical Law Enforcement at the moment.

Madam Pomfrey made an attempt to straighten herself out and answered "What I did was an absolute last resort. The Draught of Living Death put him into a deep coma. Whatever pain, and there is nothing physically wrong, Mr. Potter was feeling was driving him insane. The only way to help him is to find the cause. Then treat it. Then try to awaken him."

"TRY!?!?" a panicked Susan shouted.

The Medi-Witch nodded "That is the risk---"

"Headmaster!" a disheveled, limping Professor Snape interrupted the proceedings. He furiously shoved Fred and George aside and grabbed a fistful of Susan's robe "I demand this brat's immediate expulsion!!"

Susan shoved her wand into his side and yelled “Expelliarmus!” blasting the Potions Professor halfway across the room.

Amelia fired the same spell, but missed because of Susan’s spell. However, she fired an “Incarcerous!” that left him bundled in ropes like a mummy.

“REALEASE ME AT ONCE!!” the imprisoned professor yelled.

“Silencio!” Amelia fired. “And don’t even try to break it, or I’ll shove a dirty sock down your throat!”

Dumbledore had his wand out “Amelia, peace.” He said “I will just release Severus then we can discuss---”

“No!” she cut him off “Mister Snape stays as he is until I say so!”

Fluffing his beard, the Headmaster scolded her “Now, Amelia, it is most undignified to leave a professor in such a state in front of students. Further Professor Snape deserves to be addressed as such in---”

“Not if he is no longer a professor!” Amelia declared, cutting him off again.

This time, Dumbledore showed anger “That authority is reserved to the Headmaster!” he snapped.

“I do not believe Hogwarts can employ an individual who is in Azkaban.” She countered, coolly, tightly controlling her temper “And from this day forward I will be monitoring Mister Snape’s every class, personally. Most especially, his Fifth Year one.”

Fred and George hooted and applauded. “WOOOOWHOOOO!!”

The Headmaster gave them both a withering glare “I believe we should discuss this at another time.” He said “For now...Poppy... please ... what is wrong with Harry?”

"First, we will need to make the antidote for The Draught of Living Death. That potion takes several days." She said.

Dumbledore nodded "Of course, Severus will---"

"Bullshit!" Susan cursed. Ignoring the shocked expressions, she added "Hannah can do it!"

The blond Hufflepuff shook her head and paled "No way." She said faintly "I...we haven't even (gulp) sat OWLs yet."

"Hogwarts has but one Potion Master." Professor Dumbledore stated "I would trust no one other than a fully certified Potions Master to brew that particular potion. Therefore---"

Hannah brightened suddenly and cut in "Or...Potions Mistress. What's wrong with Mrs. Bones?"

"It is a reasonable compromise, Headmaster." Amelia offered. There was no expression on her face. "My sister-in-law is fully certified."

Not entirely pleased, Dumbledore nevertheless surrendered gracefully "Joan does supply certain potions from time to time. So, assuming she is willing, I have no objection."

"Thank you for your permission, Headmaster." Amelia replied with equal grace.

"May I...perchance...examine my patient?" an irritated Madam Pomfrey asked.

There was hesitation, a few seconds of indecision, then nodding, and everyone filed out.

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A deafening silence fell over the group while they waited in the hall. Madam Bones had unceremoniously released and sent away Professor Snape, who had looked upon the MLE Director with a loathing even Harry hadn't evoked. At this point, it was a tough call as

to whether Professor Snape or Inquisitor Umbridge topped her list. NO ONE lays hands on her family!

“Mr. Potter’s condition is extremely grave.” The Medi-witch finally reported “There is, as I said, nothing wrong with him physically. In fact, he is in remarkable condition. Especially so, when accounting for the injuries over the summer.”

Susan snapped at her “Stop beating around the bush!”

“As I was saying...” Madam Pomfrey continued “...Mr. Potter has very severe magical and mental damage. There is very complex series of spells that were on him for years that were recently simply ripped out by their roots. Completely separate from that, Mr. Potter’s mind has been brutalized. Even the natural blocks on his mind have collapsed.”

Hermione raised her hand as if in class and asked “Excuse me, Madam Pomfrey, but does that mean Harry is telepathic?”

“A Muggle term that describes what we call Legilimency.” The Medi-witch explained “In this situation, however, what we have is someone who cannot block thoughts at all. Imagine being in a crowded room with everyone shouting at the top of their voices in your ears. And worse, that they are shouting everything they know and think all at the same time.”

“What could possibly cause that?” asked Hermione.

Susan gave an angry look “Who cares, Hermione!? What’s important is fixing it?”

“I can treat the spell damage, even without knowing what spells were involved. In fact, if it were just that, Potter would be up and around tomorrow.” Madam Pomfrey informed them “Unfortunately, I don’t even know where to begin with the mental damage. I must call in a Mind Healer.”

Hermione looked excited “They’re very rare! There are maybe twenty in the world! I read all about them!” She found herself glancing at Ron,

expectantly, feeling something was missing. Her excitement fell as she concluded “Which isn’t very important. Helping Harry is.”

“I’d like to see him.” Said Susan.

Madam Pomfrey shook her head “Now that I have a diagnosis, I cannot allow it. The only people who should get within twenty meters of Mr. Potter are trained Occuluments.”

“Very well, Poppy.” Dumbledore said “I recommend everyone turn in for the night. You are all rather past curfew.” There was a glint of humor in his eyes when he suggested “Ronald, kindly ensure that your brothers get safely back to the Gryffindor Common Room.”

Ron smirked and replied “Yessir!”

“Don’t push it little brother!” the twins exclaimed together.

“I’ll escort Susan personally.” Amelia said. Both Hufflepuffs began to protest, but she cut them off “We have a few things to talk about.”

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After everyone else departed, they began walking the stone corridor. “What is it, Auntie?”

“I’m Harry’s attorney, but I’m also your Aunt, dear.” Said Amelia

Susan broke in “That’s not a good start.”

“Now hear me out.” Amelia replied “I am not at all suggesting you stop seeing Harry. In fact, I am not so old that I don’t understand the boy’s attraction.”

Susan made a face.

Amelia couldn’t suppress a laugh “At any rate. You, I hope, are aware that you’ve violated more school rules than I can shake my wand at this year. And I’m not talking about Delores.”



"I don't know---" Susan began

Amelia cut her off "Don't bother finishing, because I can tell you word for word what was said between your boyfriend and his ex this evening."

"You're having me followed!!" Susan accused her aunt.

Not the least bit abashed, Amelia countered "No, I am having Harry followed. I would be a poor Auror if I didn't know what was going on right under my nose. And I am certain that your Headmaster has found out in his own manner."

"oh." Susan replied faintly.

"This tells me that Professor Dumbledore does not disapprove, at least." Amelia explained "Which makes me wonder why he accepted Percy Weasley as an instructor."

Susan put in "Why did he put up with Umbitch?"

"That would be another of my concerns." Amelia scolded her niece "I worry that Harry is having too strong an influence on you. That---"

Susan cut her off "---What? Harry's got me Imperioused? Feel free to test me!"

"I didn't say that!" Amelia snapped "I was not even thinking that. However, what I do recall is the young girl who thought Albus Dumbledore was Merlin reincarnated."

Susan shrugged and replied "That's got more to do with what happened after the fight. And him coming down on Harry for defending himself against Snape. I still think he's a great wizard. But ...human... And after that ... No... I don't trust Snape. And that isn't just about Harry."

"Yes, I noticed how every one of you stood your ground tonight." Amelia said thoughtfully "And I have a mountain of reports of his behavior in class. I might just have been blinded as to who was the

real threat. But, other than drowning me in paperwork, Delores is essentially neutralized.”

Susan didn't like that comment at all “Aunt Ami, please be careful. She's dangerous.” She cautioned “She somehow got back here after the Blood Quill incident.”

“You have every right to hate her, Sue. Don't worry, she won't get out from under thumb.” Amelia said in a comforting tone. They had arrived at the entrance to the Hufflepuff Common Room “Well, here we are.”

Susan paused before saying the password “Auntie?” she asked “Can you teach me Occulumenty? At least enough so I can be near Harry? Please?”

“I can.” Amelia replied “But, I'll want your parents' permission. And it cannot interfere with your normal schoolwork.”

Susan hugged her enthusiastically “No problem! No Problem At All!!”

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“I have a difficult time believing Miss Bones managed to learn Occulumenty in three days.” A disgruntled Madam Pomfrey said, that Friday night.

Madam Bones replied “And I don't mean to say that Susan is fully trained. She would not be able to block concentrated Legilimenty. But, she is skillful enough to keep from broadcasting her thoughts.”

“In three days?” the Medi-witch asked doubtfully.

Susan put in “I'm highly motivated, Madam Pomfrey. And ... I promise ... if Harry shows even the slightest sign of distress, I'll leave.”

“That sounds a little rehearsed.” She commented “And...while it is against my better judgment---”

Susan squealed a “Thanks” and started in.

“Not like that, you don’t!” Madam Pomfrey scolded the girl and grabbed her arm.

Susan sobered up and walked in quietly. She gently lifted Harry’s head and fluffed his pillow. Then began speaking in low tones as she lightly brushed his arm with her fingers.

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In the pre-dawn gloom of the Hospital Wing, Susan was jolted awake. Someone was standing over Harry. She slipped her hand into her robes. But, before she could draw her wand, or utter a sound she was paralyzed. Helpless and frozen, she could only look at the man who had somehow caught her without uttering a spell or drawing a wand. He hadn’t even looked at her.

“Hello, Susan Bones.” The man finally said, turning his attention from Harry. “You may speak, but nothing above a whisper.”

She immediately tried to scream “HELP!” but it came out a feeble whisper. “Who’re you? What’re you doing to him?” she demanded. Susan’s body still refused to obey her will.

“Be at ease. I am here to help.” He replied gently.

With reverence, Susan asked “You’re a Mind Healer?”

“Not precisely, child” he replied “What I did was show young Harry how to close his mind to unwanted noise.”

Pleased at the news, but still a little untrusting, she asked “Then why doesn’t he wake up?”

“I only intervene with problems that are beyond your abilities.” The man replied. “Both Madam Pomfrey and your mother’s preparations are adequate and sufficient.”

Susan found him a little irritating “Do you know everything?” she complained.

“Infinite knowledge is outside my abilities.” He replied, completely unruffled “What knowledge I can offer you is that our young friend here forgot that he does not ask for help enough.”

Susan would have nodded if she could “I know... But, what, exactly, does that mean this time?”

“You must ask him. If I gave you all the answers, child, then you would not learn anything.” He replied.

Annoyed, Susan asked “Do I at least get a name?”

“You may tell only Albus and Harry that I am Nicolas Flamel.” The man replied

Susan’s eyes bulged out in surprise “Funny! I always pictured you looking like Dumbledore, only older!”

“I trust that means you think I look good for 671?” Nicolas commented with a quirk of an eyebrow.

“You look more like my Dad’s age.” Susan replied, then asked “I don’t suppose you can let me up?”

Nicolas shook his head, and gave her a pleased smile “Always precede a request with a complement.” He observed “No, child, not until I have left. Which it is about time I do so.”

“Wait!” exclaimed Susan “I’m sure Harry would want to meet you!”

Shaking his head gravely, Nicolas said “Harry is not yet ready. And tell Albus he should very carefully consider our last conversation.”

“He’ll be disappointed.” said Susan.

Nodding, the longest living wizard known said "I imagine so. But, I assure you, that it is you who will be most displeased when we do meet again."

"What does that mean!?" she exclaimed.

Ignoring the question, he simply disappeared. No portkey, no fireplace, no apparation pop.

## 29 – One Down

Albus Dumbledore stood in the midst of the group of people that were waiting for Joan Bones to arrive with the antidote for the Draught of Living Death. The Headmaster had a lot on his mind and no solutions for the current predicament. His authority was under siege on two fronts and, for some reason, he could no longer count on unquestioning support from his Deputy Headmistress.

While he earnestly hoped for Harry's recovery, the arrival of Susan's mother would introduce a whole new problem. Dumbledore would eventually be faced with an angry woman demanding action against the Professor who had assaulted her daughter, and who was backed by one of the most powerful figures in government. Severus was also becoming unreliable, the apparent result of that was a terse note sent through Arabella Figg.

Dumbledore,

You have not kept up your end. Potter is no longer welcome here.

P. Dursley

The blood magic he had carefully created and maintained for fifteen years had been obliterated. That had been the complex magic Madam Pomfrey referred to. Why Harry suffered for it, he did not understand. The Headmaster assumed that the breakdown of Harry's mental defenses was another effect of the collapse of the blood magic. Dumbledore's final concern was the sudden reappearance of Nicolas Flamel. And the rather ominous tone of his discussion with young Miss Bones.

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Joan Bones, accompanied by her youngest daughter, had floored to Hogsmeade. Then mounting brooms, raced to Hogwarts. It was much faster than the carriages. And, rather than plodding through long castle corridors, the pair simply arrived over the Hospital Wing. She rapped on a window, which opened to admit them.

“Hi Mum!” Susan greeted her with a hug.

Joan returned the hug “Good to see you, too. But how much of this is just because I’m waking your boyfriend?” she said teasingly.

“I like your Mum. She’s pretty funny.” said Ron with a laugh.

Tina, meanwhile, had focused on the other male Weasley “Are you Fred or George?” she asked.

“Ahh...our reputations precede us...As it happens I would be Frederick Weasley...Much the handsomer of an illustrious pair.” He replied, gallantly offering a hand.

The blond Bones grabbed his hand and Fred screamed for about thirty seconds. He tried to pull away, but Tina trapped his hand between both of hers. “And you talk too much!” she said with a feral grin.

“What did you do?!?” a stunned Fred asked. He looked at his hand as if expecting it to fall off.

Mrs. Bones rolled her eyes and said “Honestly, Tina. You promised to behave.”

“Sorry, Mum.” The young girl replied, not sounding the least bit. She turned her hand and said “Muggle gadget, it’s called a joy-buzzer.”

Fred burst out laughing “Got by a kid!” he exclaimed. “My dear, would you care to meet my brother?”

“First, we make sure Harry is recovered.” Mrs. Bones said.

Amelia agreed with her sister-in-law “And perhaps we can get a clue as to the cause of his collapse.”

“But the most important part is that Harry is well.” said Dumbledore “I am more than prepared to live with the mystery.”

Mrs. Bones fixed him with a hostile glare and said "We will discuss certain things later, Headmaster." She turned to the Medi-witch and said "Shall we, Poppy."

"OK." Susan said, falling in step behind her mother.

Joan stopped her daughter "No, dear, that isn't wise. I don't think anything will go wrong, but there are sometimes side effects."

"I don't care!" Susan snapped.

Joan grabbed both of Susan's shoulders and pushed her back firmly "I said NO!"

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"I'm all prepared." Madam Pomfrey reported. Harry lay in his bed, arms and legs both tied down physically and reinforced by magic.

The two women sat on either side of the bed and Joan poured the potion into Harry's mouth. Only a minute passed and Harry's body twitched. Then, despite all the buildup, he simply opened his eyes.

"How do you feel, Mr. Potter?" the Medi-witch asked.

Harry sighed blissfully. There were no voices pouring into his head. And the ripping sensation he'd felt was gone. "Like I don't belong in bed anymore, ma'am." He replied. "Could I have my glasses?"

"One test and you're free to go." Was the reply. She nodded at Joan and they both dropped their Occulumency shields. "Any discomfort at all?"

Not understanding what they were testing, Harry said "Nope! Feel great!"

"Libria" said Joan waving her wand, which freed Harry's limbs.

Still without his glasses, Harry rested his hand on the nearby leg and said "Y'know this is a fair spot to sn---"



"I think you should put on your glasses before finishing that sentence." Joan cut him off.

Harry's vision cleared and his eyes bugged out "M-m-mm-rs. B-b-bb—bones!" he stammered "I-I- I-I- I-I."

"I think we can assume you weren't flirting with me." She said with an amused expression. "I'll go let the army in."

Harry sat up and buried his head in his hands, muttering "Never, ever do that again. Ever. Ever. Ever."

"Hey mate." Ron was first to say.

Harry shrugged and grinned. He commented on the fact that his two best friends didn't seem to hate each other anymore "You two ok?"

"Not as a couple." Hermione answered "But, I think we're getting better."

Susan wiped a happy tear off her cheek and said "I'm so glad you're alright, Harry."

"Hey, don't cry." He replied softly "So...What happened this time?" And, hardly had he finished, that he pointed at Madam Pomfrey and, in perfect time with her, asked "What is the last thing you remember, Mr. Potter?"

The group laughed while the Medi-witch scowled, though she finally ended with a half-grin.

"Right, let's see...I was having an argument with Ginny...and, no she didn't hex me. Then the next thing I know, I get this burning feeling all over my body. It was like getting crucio'd only more." Harry said.

Madam Bones interrupted the story, asking "Harry, what would you know about that."

“Barty Jr. taught it when he was disguised as Moody last year.” He replied “Then Voldemort used it on me, that night, in the graveyard.”

Susan looked horrified. She welled up and sobbed “You—never told.--me that---part.”

“Well---” explained Harry “---it...I mean...we didn’t really know each other that well---err...then...And, its not something I really wanted to think about. Sorry.”

Susan laid her head gently on his shoulder and replied “Oh...Harry...I’m not angry at you. It’s just...no one should go through that.”

“Thanks.” He replied, kissing her temple “Anyway, something worse happened after that. All of a sudden, I heard all these voices. They were all screaming at me. I tried to cover my ears. But they just kept getting louder and louder. It was like being at the World Cup...but worse.”

“Harry, let me explain.” Madam Bones began “You see, before birth, we’re all highly sensitive to thoughts---Muggles and Magicals alike. But, in being born, the shock tends to overwhelm the sense. We put up shields that make sensing each others’ thoughts impossible ---normally, that is.”

Ron, and actually George too, thought that was the greatest thing “Neat, Harry! You can read minds!” their words weren’t quite the same, but that was the idea.

“No, boys” she corrected them “It is a terrible, impossible, burden. Without those defenses, no one could possibly remain sane. In fact, what Muggles call possession and insanity are mainly caused by damage to that protection. Harry, do you know anything about Occulumentency?”

Harry nodded “A little, I---”

“I think perhaps we should allow Harry to rest.” The Headmaster interrupted.

Harry did remember he was supposed to keep the Occulumenty lessons a secret "I read about it in a book."

"What book?" Hermione immediately jumped "I've never seen it! I'm sure I would have!"

Stymied, Harry bluffed, making it up as he went along "Err..." he said "I-it was ...ummm...in the ...ahh... Restricted Section."

Dumbledore gave him a twinkly eyed smile.

"Nicolas Flamel was here, Harry." said Susan, bringing the conversation to a crashing halt. "He was the one who helped you. He told me you should ask for help more often. I think this is what he was talking about."

For a moment, Harry looked at her crossly, then thought about it. "Y'know...maybe I should. Snape's been giving me Occulumenty lessons."

"Harry, you know that I expect you to refer to your Professors with respect." Dumbledore scolded him.

"I frankly see a deeper issue here, Headmaster." Madam Bones said "Harry, I know you're just recovering, but, please ... explain how you have been taught."

Before Harry replied, Dumbledore put in "I believe, Amelia, that Harry would best be served by a ni---"

"I would like to know as well." Madam Pomfrey said. "The answers could help me find any hidden damage."

"I think, Albus, we will allow Harry to make that decision." She replied, bluntly "Harry, if you're tired?"

Shaking his head, Harry said "I'm fine. Well, except for a headache. Anyway... the first time...I....and pretty much every time...Snape just---"

"Professor Snape, Harry." Dumbledore said, emphasizing the title.

Harry was tired of that "Fine...Snivellus!" he snapped "As I was saying ...Snivellus... just fired the Legilimens spell at me."

"Am I to understand he gave you no instruction at all as to how to defend yourself?" Madam Bones asked in a tightly controlled voice.

Harry shrugged and replied "Well...not exactly...he told me to clear my mind."

"And he showed you how to do that?" she followed up. To which Harry shook his head. Madam Bones asked him "Whose idea was it that a Fifth Year needed to learn an Auror level skill?"

"It is apparent that Severus was somewhat aggressive in his teaching methods." Dumbledore offered in a conciliatory tone. "I shall discuss--  
\_"

She turned a cold glare on the Headmaster "That's like saying Dark Lords are inconveniences." She said in a diamond hard tone "You-will-not-be-discussing-this. Auror Smythe, reveal yourself."

"Yes, Director." Came a concealed voice. Cancelling the disillusionment spell revealed an Amazon sized woman. "Orders?"

"Get reinforcements, at least two, and arrest Severus Snape." Madam Bones commanded.

In yet another effort, the Headmaster said "Now, Amelia, surely this can be settled quietly, reasonably."

"The charge is mind-rape, Smythe." Madam Bones said harshly. "And, if you interfere, you can have the next cell Dumbledore."

The silence that had fallen on the Hospital Wing was broken by Harry "So what he did to me was wrong?"

“One hundred percent, Harry.” replied Madam Bones. She sat at the foot of the bed and patted his legs “And, honestly, having your mind assaulted like that---it must have hurt. Why didn’t you report it?”

Harry sighed dejectedly “Just thought that was the way it was taught.”

“Well, when you’re back to normal, I’ll give you some proper lessons in the art.” She offered “That is, if you want.”

Harry shrugged “I dunno.” He said “I think abo---”

The Headmaster interrupted “I must insist that you do so, Har---”

“WHY!” Harry shouted

“We will discuss that after I take up another matter with you.” Dumbledore replied “I would ask that everyone allow us some privacy.”

Everyone started moving and when he felt Susan move Harry held her arm “No!” he protested “I’d like everyone to remain.”

“Harry this is rather private.” the Headmaster said.

“I trust them more than I trust you.” Harry grumbled.

“I am still the Headmaster of this school.” Dumbledore said “And I will be obeyed.”

Harry made an effort to get out of bed and failed, slumping back. Susan helped him swing his feet back into bed. “Thanks.” He said softly to her, then to Dumbledore, defiantly, he countered “Won’t make a bloody bit of difference. Anything you tell me, I’ll just tell them.”

“Then nothing more need be said.” the Headmaster said in a clipped tone “And ten points from Gryffindor for cursing.” With that, he swept out of the room. Surprising everyone, though, Susan’s mother chased after him and didn’t return.

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The past three months had wrought some changes in who sat with whom in the Great Hall. It had been gradual, so that if you were a regular participant, you might not have noticed the changes. But, if you hadn't been around since ....say Christmas, for example... the differences would be rather surprising. Perhaps shocking.

Without any real intent, Harry and Susan continued their habit of sitting roughly equally at either House's table. There wasn't much of a pattern to it, but it worked out if you averaged it.

Luna Lovegood was most often to be found with Neville at the Gryffindor table. They had rubbed off each other quite nicely. Neville had been responding to teasing in similar ways to Luna, driving all but the most persistent teasers away. Actual bullies (thanks to the DL) found either their wands, or themselves, flying through the air.

Ginny, much to Seamus' annoyance, almost never wanted to sit with her dormmates. She wouldn't sit at a different table, but would either seek out Hermione or Luna and Neville.

The one that was hardest to detect, but most shocking ... if you were observant... was not a movement between tables. Professor Snape refused to allow that. But that a group of Gryffindors ... That group included the Weasley Twins and Fred's girlfriend, Alicia... tended to always be back to back with a group of Slytherins, including Daphne Greengrass and the recently added Draco Malfoy. Vince Crabbe and Greg Goyle now flanked Pansy Parkinson during mealtimes. Hermione, or Ron, would occasionally be there; or sitting with Harry and Susan.

Seating says a lot.

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"Heard you were in hospital again, Potter." Seamus Finnegan sneered. "Too bad it wasn't anything permanent."

This was the other change. As Draco Malfoy seemed to be neglecting his 'antagonize Harry' duties, Seamus had to make up for it.

"Lovely to see you again, Seamus." Susan said with the perfect political smile learned from her aunt. She clenched her fist on the seated Gryffindor's shoulder. She froze his robes, sweater, shirt and undershirt clear through.

Seamus twisted away, teeth clicking together "T-to s-sc-scared t-to f-f-fight your own b-bbattles, Po-Potter!" he growled.

"No, you're just not worth his time." Susan sneered. Then her smile was back. "Have a nice day!"

Speaking of seating, something had changed at the Head Table. Everyone was used to the group that had accompanied Madam Bones. Xenophilis Lovegood wasn't always there, Luna's father had a paper to publish, so it wasn't his absence that had started whispering in the Great Hall.

It was the absence of Professor Snape and the presence of an attractive blond-haired woman in his place that had the rumor mill spinning. Deputy Headmistress McGonagall tapped her glass, which was the traditional attention signal. So, the handful of students still standing rushed to their seats. Everyone gave the Head Table their attention.

"A brief announcement before we fill our bellies." Headmaster Dumbledore said "Professor Snape is on a sabbatical---"

The majority of the students cheered. The bewitched image in the ceiling quivered. For Harry, the outburst was slightly stressful and he had to clamp down and concentrate his thoughts to block out the noise. He would definitely take Madam Bones up on her offer.

"---Filling in temporarily" continued Dumbledore, disregarding the outburst "will be Joan Bones." He waved a hand and Susan's mother stood. "Please welcome Professor Bones."

Hannah Abbott, sitting beside Ron, glared at her best friend “You didn’t tell me!” she accused.

“I-I didn’t know.” Susan protested. “Its just as much a surprise to me.”

Acknowledging the applause, Professor Bones said “Thank you, thank you very much. You’re all very kind. Or...trying to get on my good side.”

There was a round of laughter at that. And...one suggestive whistle...At least one student thought the new professor was attractive.

“That’s my Mum, you git!” an outraged, childish voice came from the very first seat at the Hufflepuff table. So did a banana, that splatted on the back of the offender’s head.

Professor Bones scolded her daughter “Christina Elizabeth Bones! Shame on you!”

“Additionally, until Professor Snape’s return” Dumbledore put in “we shall have a young guest with us, who did not quite meet the cutoff this year. Now, dig in.”

The youngest Bones was immediately besieged by the Hufflepuff Quidditch team. The team included the captain and another chaser who were both Seventh Years and wouldn’t be returning. And Tina had thrown a very awkward object, with dead-on accuracy, half-way across the Hall.

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“Welcome, Fifth Years.” Professor Bones said at the stroke of one. “You all enjoyed lunch, I trust.”

Without raising his hand, Draco asked “Professor, what happened to Professor Snape?”

“In future, Mr. Malfoy, raise your hand and wait to be called on.” She replied “Now, previous classes have commented that my style is



different than Professor Snape's. Whether that is good or bad, I leave to you. In answer to your question, I will not be taking up class time with the matter. Check tomorrow's paper. I find The Quibbler to be the most accurate source of news."

Harry and Susan leaned into each other and shared a little laugh.

Professor Bones pointed her wand at the couple and their desks sprang apart by two feet. She said "So there is no confusion, yes, I am Susan's mother. But, if she disrupts the class, she can expect the same treatment as any discr---"

Pansy entered the classroom several minutes late and took her seat.

"Miss Parkinson, have you an excuse slip for your tardiness?" asked Professor Bones.

The Slytherin shook her head and began "No, but, Professor Snap---"

"Is not here at the moment." Professor Bones interrupted "That will be five points from Slytherin and one day detention. As I was saying, fair but firm is my policy. My job is to teach, yours is to learn. If we both do our jobs, we'll all succeed."

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At the end of the class, Susan lingered "So, Mum, that's why you chased after Dumbledore." She commented.

"Surprise!" said Joan, cheerily.

Susan laughed at that "So what does Daddy think?"

"Your father thinks it is a quote fine opportunity for Tina to get a leg up on next year unquote." She replied "And like I said, don't expect me to go easy on you."

Susan pouted playfully and said "Yes, Mummy."

"This year just got a whole lot better." Harry added meaningfully.

Shaking her finger at her daughter's boyfriend, Professor Bones scolded him lightly "None of that kissing up, Mr. Potter. Now, I believe you two have that Wizard Government class."

"How do professors do that!?" asked Harry, very curious and somewhat annoyed that he couldn't seem to.

Professor Bones was of no help "That...Harry...is a secret." She replied "Now, off you go." Joan watched them go with a smirk on her face. She didn't know everyone's schedule that well. But...her own daughter's classes? Piece of Cake...There were a few spells that the Headmaster had taught her, to help with names and faces. The spells were centuries old. You had to take a Wizard's Oath to not reveal them.

In came the First Year class. The group included Tina, who was following a group of Ravenclaws to classes. Tina sat next to one of her best friends who was just a few months older, but a First Year already because of the cutoff days.

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The number one topic of conversation among the students at supper time was, of course, the new Potions Professor. The majority of students had positive things to say about Susan's mother. The number was, in fact, almost exactly three-quarters.

Years of favoritism by Professor Snape, almost naturally, led to Slytherins condemning Professor Bones with very few exceptions. The very same reason was cited by those on the other side of the discussion. Ravenclaws, Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs found the change refreshing. There, too, were exceptions.

"She was a right bitch to me." complained Seamus Finnegan. "That extra homework she dumped on me."

Dean Thomas rolled his eyes "You were supposed to mince the grindylow leaves, not cut them in long strands. Snape woulda given you detention and taken points."

"Can't really say she was all that nice to me either." Ginny added.

Neville made an irritated noise and said "Think that might change if you stopped being nasty to Susan?"

"I'm not gonna be buddy buddy with that two timin---" she began.

Neville lost his patience, he cut her off "Ginny, Harry's my friend! And so's Susan! I know for a fact what you said in that article wasn't true."

"Some friend you are, Lardbottom!" Seamus blurted out.

Neville clenched his fists. Only Luna prevented him from reaching across the table and hitting the Irish boy. "Who knows that it takes sixteen muscles to frown, but only three to smile?" she asked dreamily.

"I'm getting a little sick of the space cadet too!" Seamus shouted at Luna.

Ginny elbowed him in the ribs --- hard --- "I don't know what that means." She hissed "But don't insult Luna! Or Neville, either!"

"Sorry!" Seamus grunted, rubbing his side.

"Not good enough!" Neville growled, completely unsatisfied "Sit somewhere else tomorrow, Finnegan."

Seamus got out of his seat, said "Fine with me. Come on Gin." And started off.

"Be there in a minute." She replied to her boyfriend. Then turning to Neville, she said "Look, he apologized."

Neville rolled his eyes at her and said "Oh, please...he didn't mean it. We all know it. I don't know what his problem is. And, you know what, I don't care anymore."

"I'm sorry, Neville. You, too, Luna." Ginny said as she stood.

Luna replied "You didn't do anything wrong, Gin."

"Thanks." Ginny said, smiling down at her friend. "I'll talk to him. I'll fix this."

Neville went back to the original subject as Ginny departed "So, Dean, how about you? You like Bones?"

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"I already have a dozen written complaints about your sister-in-law." Lucius Malfoy said "And a great many more Slytherins have made passing comments."

The Bones Committee, as it had come to be called, was sitting around a heavy wood conference table in Amelia's quarters. "I suspect it would just be a matter of settling in, Mr. Malfoy." She replied diplomatically "Joan is a fully certified Potions Mistress."

"I think that Slytherins are just getting a taste of fair and impartial instruction and not liking it." Gideon Prewett commented. He had an amused expression on his face.

Xenophilis Lovegood, who had only recently returned after a couple of days at The Quibbler, said "I had seen Professor Snape in operation. But, to be fair, I don't know Professor Bones."

"Gideon, please, comments like that are not helpful." Amelia pointed out "Remember, we are here for the benefit of the school. Not to quarrel amongst ourselves. Understand, I picked the three of you to ensure our fairness. One from each House. And, before accusing Joan of bias, I should remind you that her husband attended this school in Slytherin House."

Lucius gave a distasteful look and responded "That is neither here, nor there. The issue is that the removal of Professor Snape has left Slytherin House without a Head. The students have no one to turn to, to look out for their interests in Inter-House disputes."

“Severus Snape has been accused of a serious crime.” Amelia countered, her voice cold “He will remain --- in custody --- at the Ministry, until his trial. And, if found guilty, he will be imprisoned in Azkaban for a number of years. Just as Headmaster Dumbledore appointed a replacement for the Potions position, I’m certain he will select a new Head of House.”

Gideon cackled “Couldn’t happen to a finer man!”

“Shut up, you old fool!” Lucius growled.

Gideon only laughed harder “Maybe you’d like another chat with Ginevra!”

Amelia’s wand emitted a loud, high pitched bang ending the bickering. “Gentlemen, please!” she snapped “We will certainly investigate the issues. Of course, I disqualify myself from sitting in on Professor Bones’ classes. Up next...I’m sorry Gideon...we need to take a serious look at Professor Weasley.”

The Bones Committee meeting stretched past curfew.

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Not that he didn’t like Amelia Bones, or Joan Bones, or Tina Bones, Harry did. But, he was exceedingly glad to get into the Hufflepuff Common Room and out of where one of them might turn a corner suddenly.

“Feeling pent up, are we?” asked Susan with a teasing lilt in her voice.

Harry growled deep in his throat, scooped her off her feet and carried her to one of the windows.

“HAHAHA!!” Justin Finch-Fletchley laughed “Must suck to have your girlfriend’s family prowling the school!” There wasn’t any more grudge between them. The comment was said jokingly. Other Hufflepuffs present laughed along with it.

Harry put Susan down on the yellow velvety surface of the windowsill and glared at him. "Go-a-way!" he gritted out from between his teeth.

"Hmm...if you're more interested in talking to Justin...I'll ju---" Susan was saying, she tossed her hair about and went to stand.

Harry pulled the heavy red curtains over the window, sat next to her and cast a silencio on the curtains. "It's been a bloody long day!" he exclaimed before kissing her.

"No one was going to stop you." Susan said, five minutes later and sporting bruised lips.

Harry looked at her doubtfully and asked "So, I should just snog the daylights out of you in front of your Mum?"

"Why not?" she replied.

Harry traced a finger down her neck and over her uniform shirt, feeling the material of her bra "Shoullld llll do this, tooooo?" he asked drawling out the words.

"If you want to." She answered. And, responding to his touch, she ran a lazy hand up his left leg.

He caressed her cheek with his other hand and pulled her into another kiss. You couldn't quite lay out on one of the windowsills, but soon enough Susan's bare breasts were pressed into and rubbing against Harry's solid chest. Everyone knew not to throw open a set of curtains with privacy wards up.

Susan felt Harry drag his teeth across her neck and moaned "You know what that does to me."

"Nnnnope." He replied as he took to adding another bruise to Susan's collection.

She moved to give Harry greater access and dug her fingers into his back. Susan wasn't one for long fingernails, but Harry had

accumulated a fair bunch of minor scratches. And while they did heal over time, obviously they never quite went away.

“Ahhhhh!” Harry sighed some thirty minutes later. He felt satisfied and happy. A well deserved sensation after the past weekend. One hand running through her bright red hair and the other gently cupping her breast, he said “These last months...I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

Susan blushed lightly and replied “Aww...you’re sweet...Guess you’d still be hanging around with you-know-you.”

“Huh?” he started, then remembered his own joke regarding Ginny. “God forbid.” He laughed as he gave her nipple a twist.

In retaliation Susan gave his hand a slap. “That hurrrt.” She pouted.

“Awww...should I kiss it all better.” Harry retorted with a smirk.

Susan laughed softly and said “No...I think we should (yawn) turn in.”

“Spoilsport.” He called her when she sat up and began dressing.

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After a final goodnight kiss, Harry headed for the Fifth Year dorm. He stripped off his clothes and put on pajamas. But, before he could crawl into bed, a brown owl with Ministry markings tapped on the dorm window. He opened the window and allowed the owl to hop in. The owl studied him for a moment then extended its leg. The letter was addressed to him in familiar writing. He offered the owl a treat and opened the letter. Now he knew the handwriting, it was from the ex-Potions Professor. Harry could practically hear the sneer in the paper.

Congratulations Potter,

Think you got rid of me with your pathetic whining?

Well guess again! I expect you to be properly apologetic at my trial. Explain how the charges are false and that you are the miserable little liar anyone with half a brain knows you to be.

And, in case the simple truth isn't enough of a motivation, then consider the situation of THE MUTT. Would it not be too bad if I were to let slip his whereabouts? The Ministry probably won't even bother with a trial. All that has to happen is an order to the Dementors to pick up their escapee. Perhaps I shall just tell the Head of Magical Law Enforcement.

My terms are non-negotiable. Tell no one. You have two days to agree.

Professor Snape

Certified Potions Master – 1st Class

Hogwarts Potions Master

Head of Slytherin House

Harry glared at the piece of paper, his emotions torn. He burned with hate for Snape. He shuddered with fear for Sirius. And that part of him that was always mad at Dumbledore for keeping secrets kicked him in the side, reminding Harry that he had been keeping a major secret from Susan. He felt angry, afraid, hatred and helpless all at the same time.



## 30 – The Trial of Severus Snape

Harry didn't show up for breakfast the morning after getting Professor Snape's ultimatum. Instead, operating blindly, he found his way to Arithmancy two hours early. And he sat there in yesterday's crumpled robes. If asked, he wouldn't have remembered getting dressed.

The class filtered in. Of his closest friends, only Ron shared this class. Hermione was in Ancient Runes and Susan was with most of the Hufflepuffs in Hagrid's Care of Magical Creatures Class. "Hey, mate, everyone was looking for you." He said, before Professor Trelawney arrived.

"Ih." Harry grunted dully. It was enough to satisfy Ron for the moment because Trelawney arrived.

Harry's handling and fiddling with the crystal ball...after Ron pushed it at him, anyway...was enough to satisfy the unconventional professor that he was participating.

"You don't look so good, Harry." Said Ron as they, him practically dragging Harry, made their way to Astronomy.

Vacantly, Harry replied "Sure Ron."

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"Harry! You're a fright!" exclaimed Hermione the moment she saw the approaching boys. "Look at yourself! That looks like you wore it yesterday and you're all baggy eyed!"

Zacharias Smith protested the attention his not-quite-yet-girlfriend was showering on Harry "Hey! How'bout some of that over here!"

"Bit of a git, ain't he." Ron commented.

Hermione rolled her eyes and hissed "Not now, Ron!"

They both looked at the bespectacled wizard expecting an outburst and were more worried when nothing came of it.

"Look, Harry" said Hermione "At least try to pay attention and we can talk on the way to lunch."

For the first time, Harry responded to her, zombie-like "Im-no'ungry."

After class, which Harry managed to get through by sheer dumb luck, The Trio, followed by a frustrated Zac Smith made their way to the Great Hall. Ron and Hermione were all but carrying Harry.

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"About bloody time!" an exasperated Susan exclaimed on seeing them "Harry...what's wrong?"

Harry had been guilt-tripping himself all through his sleepless night, so he was to the point that he couldn't look at Susan "I'm a right lousy boyfriend is what." He confessed.

"Huh?" was the confused syllable the came out of Susan's mouth. She exchanged a helpless look with Hermione. And, even as a last resort, looked at Ron for help. Then addressing Harry, asked "And how did you come by that theory?"

Showing emotion for the first time, he snapped "That's the problem! I can't say!"

"You're a bit frustrating sometimes --- like now." She replied, coolly "But, let's see, are you cheating on me?"

Harry paled "Of course not!" he exclaimed.

"Didn't think so." She replied "Did you ignore Christmas?"

Harry shook his head.

"If anything you overdid it, a bit. But that's what makes you you." She commented "Valentines Day was pretty good. And I think I can assume you haven't forgotten my birthday."

“April 29th.” Harry replied instantly.

Susan found that especially pleasing. The only time they had really discussed that was their first walk around Hogwarts Lake, and that was six months ago. “And, not that I have a huge sample, but I’d say you’re an above average snogger.” She added, playfully “Way above, in fact.”

“Uhhgg!” Ron complained.

Hermione nodded in agreement “Too much info, Sue.”

“Ah-ha, you can smile.” Susan said gently, noting the fractional upturn of Harry’s mouth.

Setting a record for most fleeting smile, Harry pulled away from the three of them and tried to leave. He immediately crashed head-first into the stone wall.

“Bloody hell!” exclaimed Fred as he walked up “I think he broke it!” He caught Harry before he fell.

All of Harry’s things spilled out of his robes and onto the floor.

“Hey, why’s Professor Snape writing to you, Potter?” asked Draco as he scooped up the envelope that skittered to a stop at his feet.

A panic-stricken Harry bounced up and snatched it out of the Slytherin boy’s grip “Gi’me that!” he demanded, he instantly fell over again.

“What, pray tell, is going on out here!?” a stony-faced Professor McGonagall demanded.

Susan, who was a master of invention, replied “We...uhh...think Harry’s having a relapse. Could you ...err... please get Madam Pomfrey, Professor?”

“Right away, Miss Bones!” The Head of Gryffindor said “As for the rest of you...get to your tables or you will miss lunch!” She rushed off.

Harry, meanwhile, was frantically patting himself down and tearing through his spilled belongings seeking Snape's actual letter. That particular item was in the hands of his intensely intelligent, and very quick reading, best female friend.

"Oh...Harry." She said pityingly. Susan, too, had been reading it. Though, she didn't understand what it meant.

For Harry, it was the last straw. He broke down, allowed himself to slide to the floor and cried.

"I don't understand, but tell me what's wrong and I'll help any way I can, Harry." Susan said as she sat next to him.

Harry didn't look up and through his sobs, he explained "That's why I'm so lousy...I been keeping secrets for so long."

"Then tell me now." She suggested "How bad can it be?"

Harry pulled away from her touch and shook his head "I can't!"

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"Honestly, Harry, all this upset is uncalled for." Headmaster Dumbledore scolded him when he, Madam Pomfrey and Professor McGonagall appeared.

The Medi-witch made a gentle Legilimency probe of Harry only to yank it away in shock. "Potter is not having a relapse." She said, not able to look at him.

"I believe the situation would not be served by throwing accusations, Professor Dumbledore." The Head of Gryffindor said, coldly. The past three months had led to major shifts in McGonagall's thinking, especially in her handling of Harry Potter. "I think the best solution is to excuse Misters Potter and Weasley and Misses Granger and Bones from afternoon classes."

“Hem, hem.” Inquisitor Umbridge coughed “That would, once again, be rewarding aberrant behavior. Something which the Ministry has determined is to be reduced. Our education system must be uniform and equitable for all students.”

“Need I remind you that as a Head of House, I have direct authority over my students.” Professor McGonagall said icily.

Inquisitor Umbridge waved off the comment “Obviously, Minerva, you also seem to have forgotten that first Miss Bones is not a member of your House. Clearly, this is a result of your lax discipline.”

“How dare you!?” The Head of Gryffindor growled “I have been a Professor almost as long as you have been alive!”

“Well, Inquisitor, as Head of Hufflepuff” Professor Sprout cut in “I do not see a problem with MY student missing an afternoon’s class as long as her education does not suffer. Naturally Miss Bones would have to agree to be responsible for the classwork.”

Susan nodded “Of course, Professor.”

“My authority, from the Minister, is transcendent.” Umbridge said stiffly “And I proclaim that all students, unless they have a legitimate excuse, must be in class. Further---“

A mocking, and much louder, version of the trademark cough cut off the speech “HEM! HEM! I believe I can settle the situation.” Madam Bones said “You four (indicating Harry, Ron, Susan and Hermione) may go. As Heads of House, I believe that Professors Sprout and McGonagall are more qualified to determine their students’ needs.”

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After making their way outside, Hermione said “Come on Harry.” She was using that Mother tone of voice that bothered Ron, but didn’t seem to bother Harry. “It would have been easier to deal with this if you had come to us before driving yourself crazy. But, there really is only one way to handle this.”

Harry gave her an angry look and said "But he trusted me!"

"Would someone tell me what's going on!" Susan demanded. Though, she was eyeing Harry.

Ron, who had finally read Snape's letter, blew off saying "That greasy-haired git!"

"I never thought of telling anyone." Harry sighed, defeatedly. "I really hate Snape."

Susan rolled her eyes impatiently and said "We know that. But why the meltdown?"

"Snape's blackmailing me into getting him off." said Harry.

Again rolling her eyes, she replied "I figured that out. But, the letter made no sense. So are you gonna explain it to me, or not?"

"You should." Ron urged.

Hermione put up a series of privacy, silencing and repelling wards around the group. Plus, they stood a hundred yards from the castle in the middle of the lush green lawn that surrounded Hogwarts. "No one will overhear us." She promised.

"Right." Harry began "But, Sue, you gotta swear not to tell anyone."

Susan nodded gravely and listened intently as Harry covered the parts of his Third Year that involved the infamous Sirius Black. "Whew!" she summed up her reaction to the story in that one syllable "No wonder you've been crazy this morning."

"And I swear, he's innocent!" Harry said emphatically "He didn't betray my parents! And he didn't kill all those Muggles!"

She nodded in agreement "I believe you, Harry. What happened to him is horrible. Think I could meet him."

A laughing Ron said "You already di---" He was cut off by a sharp elbow from Hermione. At whom, he snarled "Bloody hell, woman! Is it any wonder we broke up!"

"Shut up! Both of you!" snapped Harry "Let's just say I was gonna tell'er anyway!"

The former couple looked at each other and muttered "Sorry Harry."

"I don't know why you two can't just be friends again." Susan grumbled at them. Then to Harry "So, how could I have met Sirius Black and not known it? Glamour Charm? Polyjuice?"

Harry shook his head and said "Uh-uh...he's an Animagus. He's---"

"Snuffles!" she concluded "It all makes sense now! I knew that dog was smarter than usual!"

Harry sighed "I told him to stop showing off."

"Oh, quit grumping." Susan scolded him lightly "Most people would guess its just training."

Looking worried, Harry said "I'm not grumping. I'm worried. What if your aunt figured it out? Sirius woulda gotten served up to the Dementors by now."

"Gotta admit, its pretty good!" Susan giggled, despite the seriousness of the conversation "Not easy to pull one over Auntie Ami's eyes!"

Harry wasn't amused. "Look at Snape's letter again!" he ordered "She's the one he's threatening to tell!"

"It's a shame you missed last year's Government class, dear." Susan commented.

Susan's aunt had used a little friendly persuasion, first on Professor McGonagall, then on Headmaster Dumbledore, to allow Harry to join Susan's Wizard Government class for the second term. The class wasn't like Defense, or Transfiguration where you had previous

lessons building up to the next one. He wasn't likely to get an OWL this year, but he could learn what was being taught. "Well...what'd I miss?" he asked, impatiently.

"Black would have to be tried for escaping." She explained, ignoring Harry's tone. "And any solicitor worth their salt could use the lack of a real trial the first time to demand a new one."

Hermione looked doubtful "It can't be that simple." She said.

"I assure you, it is." Susan argued "No offense, Hermione, but you are Muggleborn. And you haven't taken the Government class for five years. I have. And Bones have been in government for centuries. Harry, whoever told you Black was going to be Kissed that night was lying."

Harry's eyes flashed to Hermione. The air around the group suddenly sizzled with raw magic. "You did!" he snarled, accusingly.

"Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!" Ron bellowed, defending her "Harry! Stop!"

Ignoring Ron and glaring at Hermione, Harry demanded "Well?!"

"It's what Professor Dumbledore told me!" she cried "I'm sorry Harry, I didn't know!"

Harry was immediately regretful "I'm sorry, Hermione." He apologized. But just as quickly, he changed back to anger. This time directed at the Headmaster "I am getting sick and bloody tired of that sodding bastard's lies!"

"Harry!" Susan said sharply "You can't go hexing him!"

Snarling in frustration, he drew his wand and fired a reducto curse at nearby rock. It exploded.

"Feel better?" asked Susan in a tone laced with sarcasm

He pouted "No!"



“Right.” She continued “Like I was saying before, the best way to stump a blackmailer is to do exactly what they’re threatening. First, send a letter to Snape agreeing to everything.”

“Why?”

“Simple trick.” Susan explained “Lets the bad guy think he’s got you.”

Hermione frowned at that and pointed out “Sounds like lying to me.”

“I don’t have any problem lying to a blackmailer.” Susan snapped at her “One good trick deserves another.”

Ron grinned “Got that right! George and Fred could use you!”

“No thanks.” She replied, with a shake of the head. “Wait’ll Tina gets into the act.”

Ron scoffed “She’s just a kid.”

“I’ll let her know you said that.” Susan shot back.

Harry grumbled “This isn’t helping Sirius!”

“This is the hard part. He needs to turn himself in.” announced Susan.

Harry shook his head “Uh-uh! No how! No way!” he denied forcefully.

“Harry, trust me.” She pleaded “In fact, I...uhh...have another ...err....idea.” Now Susan was making things up as she went along. She wished she had her aunt’s talent for putting a whole plan together. To her delight, she had said all the right things. Though, she was sure she would earn her aunt’s annoyance... at least.

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Hedwig did double duty that night. Her first stop was the Ministry with a letter addressed to Severus Snape.

“Groveling little brat!” the Potions Master sneered, feeling completely triumphant at Potter’s letter. “How I will make him pay for these last few days!”

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Hedwig’s next stop was Grimmauld Place where, at first she had to peck away Molly Weasley, then was able to deliver mail to its addressee.

“So help me! I’ll kill that slimy git!” Sirius roared as he read Harry’s letter.

“I think you should give Severus his due as a Professor.” She scolded him “I would not assume your Godson’s innocence.”

Sirius glared at her “And you’ll give Harry the respect he’s due, considering what he’s done for your family.” He fired back. “I’m leaving.” And, not giving her a chance to comment, the Azkaban escapee walked out his front door and dissapparated.

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“Finally caught you two!” Inquisitor Umbridge squealed happily “Your aunt won’t save you from a good disciplining this time, girl!”

Argus Filch was equally delighted “Could we possibly re-introduce thumb screws?” he asked hopefully.

“You won’t touch me, or Susan.” Harry declared, training his wand on his diminutive nemesis.

If anything, the threat only increased Umbridge’s delight “This goes beyond a mere school prank, Potter.” She declared “Threatening a Ministry Official in the performance of her duties is a criminal offense!”

“Perfect!” Susan countered “My aunt is Harry’s solicitor. I demand to see her at once.”

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Amelia Bones looked highly displeased at being awakened at four in the morning. And that didn't begin to cover how she felt about confronting her least favorite witch without a full night's sleep. She stormed into the classroom in a mood only to be matched by Harry's uncle "You'll have to contend with your Mother, young lady!" she told her niece, irritably.

"This wasn't about sneaking out for a snog, Auntie." Susan argued.

Madam Bones just talked right over her "And what is worse, is that for once I agree with Delores! Never mind being out of bed! You two were in Hogsmeade!!"

"Let me explain, Madam Bones." Harry pleaded.

Her glare was just as harsh to him "I don't think that is wise." She said coldly. "There's a part of me that wants to leave you with Delores at the moment."

"Aunt Amelia!" exclaimed Susan in an appalled tone "Look...this isn't what we planned...but Harry has to talk to you as his attorney."

Harry gulped under her flashing eyes "We were coming to find you when she caught us, honest." He began.

"All right, Harry." Madam Bones relented "I admit nothing I have helped you with has been a waste of time. I'm willing to give you the benefit of the doubt."

He handed her the letter he'd received from the Potion Master and said "Snape's blackmailing me into lying at his trial."

"That is quite a serious charge." She replied "And this letter certainly seems to corroborate your allegation. But, I do not understand the context."

Harry blinked at her and emitted a confused "Huh?"

“How are you being blackmailed, Harry?” Susan translated.

“Ahh!” he exclaimed “Madam Bones, you remember Snuffles, don’t you?”

Amelia was shocked. She hadn’t even noticed the huge dog’s presence. She scolded herself internally for the lack of awareness and said “Dogs are not on the school’s approved list.”

“This isn’t a regular dog. He’s an Animagus.” Harry explained. “Go ahead, Sirius.”

After a few seconds hesitation, the canine became human.

“Great Merlin’s Ghost! Sirius Black!!” Amelia Bones, Head of Magical Law Enforcement, exclaimed. She drew her wand with lightning speed. Only Kingsley Shacklebolt and Alastair Moody had faster draws “You are under arrest.”

Even though Susan knew, the transformation was a surprise. And standing in the presence of the infamous criminal left her speechless.

Sirius held up his hands in an “I’m not a threat” gesture “Harry, my wand’s in my coat pocket.” He said calmly “Hello Amelia.”

“Actually, Auntie, you can’t arrest him.” Susan said meekly.

Not taking her eyes off Sirius, Madam Bones addressed her niece “Don’t be ridiculous! I want you to go to the Headmaster and sound the alarm.”

“Not yet.” Susan insisted “And you cannot arrest him. The moment you agreed to this discussion you became Mr. Black’s attorney.”

Still focused on the escaped criminal, a shocked Madam Bones accused her “You! You! Manipulated Me!”

“Yes, ma’am” Susan admitted faintly “And, I’m sorry. But listen to Harry.”

Harry fidgeted for a moment with all the weight of the situation falling to his shoulders. "Sirius didn't betray my parents to Voldemort. That was Peter Pettigrew."

"I know all that." Madam Bones countered "You have the story backwards, Harry. Black murdered Pettigrew to cover it up. That was proven at the trial. He also killed thirteen Muggles."

Harry interrupted her "That was no trial! Sirius never got the chance to testify. They never offered him veritaserum. Crouch just had him carted off."

"Sounds like a kangaroo court to me, Auntie." Offered Susan.

Madam Bones silenced her with a momentary glance. "I was bringing in the LeStranges that day. But The Prophet said---"

"The same paper that hired Rita Skeeter?" asked Sirius in a sarcastic tone.

Madam Bones growled at him "Silence Black!"

"It never used to be---"

Madam Bones silenced him with a spell "Finish your story, quickly!" she ordered.

"I spent most of the past summer, and Christmas, at his house." Harry pointed out. "Don't you think, if he was a Death Eater, I'd be dead by now? And, did you recognize the dog? You met him at Susan's place."

Doubt finally crept into her expression. Amelia was quite distressed that she had been so easily fooled. "I was under the impression you spent both holidays with the Weasleys." She commented.

"Actually, the Weasleys stayed at---with Sirius." Replied Harry.

The hesitation in his voice was enough for the country's top Auror "This place you stayed, its under a Fidelis charm, correct." She concluded

Harry then repeated what he had told Susan for Madam Bones, concluding "---and I swear, every word is true. If you want I'll say it again under veratiserum."

"Wow." Was Amelia's monosyllabic initial response. "Well, this is a triple distilled toughie. I presume you have a solution to this."

Susan wilted slightly under her aunt's glare and replied "Urr...well...that is---"

"Come, come, child!" Amelia snapped impatiently "I don't believe you didn't think this through to a conclusion!"

Susan bristled at her aunt's sharpness, but she put that aside and concluded "Simple really, Mr. Black has to be tried for escaping Azkaban. But, during that trial, he gets to have his say under veratiserum. All you have to do is ask him about what happened after Harry's parents were murdered."

"And you think the Wizengamot will just allow a whole new trial?" asked Amelia, bearing down on her niece.

Susan shrugged "Probably not. That is, well... unless he has a good attorney."

"I see." a frowning Amelia replied. "And you realize that I could be risking my career here?" After a long thought process, during which her eyes never left Sirius, she nodded reluctantly and cancelled her silencing spell. She addressed the escapee "As your attorney, Black, I advise you to surrender."

Sirius nodded and sighed "Harry already has my wand, Amelia. And...maybe...by the end of this you could use my first name again."

And, for the next three days, the presence of the notorious Death Eater, Mass Murderer and Betrayer within the walls of Hogwarts was

known only to four Aurors; one very flummoxed Department Head and four Hogwarts students.

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March 25 found Harry once again in a courtroom facing the Wizengamot. It was his third time in this situation, and the second time as a primary participant in a case. And, he had to admit, the room felt different when you were sitting in the Prosecution seats as opposed to the Defendant seats. If there was one thing frustrating to him was the ironclad instruction from Madam Bones to keep his mouth shut outside the courtroom. He wanted nothing more than to cut loose on Snape. But, it was with wicked delight that he promised a Daily Prophet reporter that he would give a complete statement--- to The Quibbler--- after the trial.

The courtroom was filled to capacity with spectators.

In a repeat of the ritual Harry had seen previously, Madam Bones formally opened the session and offered her gavel to Dumbledore as the Supreme Mugwump. She then moved to stand beside Harry. What raised eyebrows was that the revered figure did likewise, passing the gavel to Tiberius Ogden who was the next most senior member. Harry glared at the Headmaster as he went to stand at the Defense table.

The Accused professor sneered one of his most lethal sneers and received a hateful glare in return. But, he felt completely secure in the outcome of the trial. Retribution would be his, in due time.

“Control yourself, Severus.” Dumbledore advised, placidly “And you would be well advised to make peace with Harry after this crisis has passed.”

Snape snarled at his counsel “That brat has caused so much trouble. You have no idea!---”

“Exactly my point, Severus.” Dumbledore overrode him “You have been less than forthcoming of late. So, I do not know what is going on. But, that will change. Now, be silent!”

Mr. Ogden tapped the gavel and announced "Madam Bones, for the prosecution, please begin."

"Thank you, Chief Warlock." Amelia replied. It was customary to address the person conducting the session by that title, though Dumbledore actually held the official post. "Members of the Wizengamot, it is our intention to prove that under the guise of teaching my client an advanced and rather dangerous branch of magic, Mr. Snape---"

Dumbledore stood and addressed the court "Objection, Chief Warlock, Severus Snape is a professor at Hogwarts and entitled to be referred to as such."

"Madam Bones."

Amelia nodded "Noted for future reference. At any rate, the defendant, maliciously violated Mr. Potter's mind on multiple occasions. Causing severe physical, emotional and mental damage. We intend to offer witnesses who saw Mr. Potter's breakdown as well as the victim's records from Hogwarts Hospital Wing."

"Headmaster?" Mr. Ogden queried "Your opening statement?"

Dumbledore stood and said "With respect, Chief Warlock, I am certain this is a matter that has merely been a misunderstanding that has grown out of proportion. I request the charges be dropped and Professor Snape be permitted to resume his duties."

"Madam Bones...the prosecution's position?" asked Mr. Ogden.

Amelia rose and replied "No, Chief Warlock, I do not agree. And, regardless of this case, I seriously question the defendant's appropriateness to serve in any capacity at Hogwarts. Let alone as a professor."

"Amelia, there is no cause to be abusive." Dumbledore scolded her.



Glaring, she retorted "I am no longer your student, Headmaster! And I will not be talk---"

"That is enough!" Mr. Ogden snapped "No more cross-talk or I will hold you both in contempt!"

"My apologies." Dumbledore offered "I wish it noted... for the record... that Severus has my complete faith and support."

"I object, Chief Warlock" Amelia interjected "Such a statement, coming from defense counsel, should not be entered and is irrelevant."

Mr. Ogden rubbed his temple and said "Let's just get this case going."

"The Prosecution calls Ginevra Weasley." Madam Bones announced.

There was a fair degree whispering among the crowd. All of Wizarding Britain had either directly, or indirectly, witnessed the blood-letting between the former couple. Ginny was quickly sworn in and seated.

"Good morning, Miss Weasley." She said professionally.

Ginny nodded nervously and replied "Morning."

"Well, I guess we should start with what's on everyone's mind." Said Amelia, looking at the audience "You and my client were a couple... once... correct?"

Ginny replied "True."

"Now, regardless of the details, that is no longer the case. Is that also correct?" Amelia asked.

Again, Ginny replied "True."

"Would it also be fair to say you do not get along with either Mr. Potter or his current girlfriend---my niece, Susan?"

This time, a little impatient, Ginny replied "Yes!"

"Just covering the history, it is important." Amelia explained "But, moving on. Describe for the court the circumstances that led to you being involved in Mr. Potter's recent illness."

Ginny cleared her throat, nervously and replied "I...uhh... tried to hex him. Then the whole thing spilled over into a fight."

"Not your first one, I take it." Amelia commented.

Ginny shook her head "No, Madam Bones." She confirmed "Then, Harry screamed and fell over. He was grabbing his head and yelling for everyone to shut up, even though no one was really talking. I ran out for help and saw my brothers, Hermione, a Ravenclaw boy and Susan." The final name was said with some distaste.

"And what was wrong with him?" asked Amelia, she ignored how Ginny said her niece's name.

Dumbledore objected to that "Chief Warlock, Miss Weasley, while an excellent student is not a Healer. Or, even a Healer in Training."

"No more questions, then." Amelia said, not bothering to wait for a ruling "Thank you Miss Weasley."

Dumbledore approached her and said "Good morning, Miss Weasley."

"Professor." Ginny replied. She really hadn't felt comfortable whenever she was around the Headmaster since the Chamber incident.

"Miss Weasley, what do you think of Professor Snape?" he asked.

Ginny frowned "Sorry."

"Is he a good teacher? Do you learn in his classes?" Dumbledore added.

Ginny shrugged "He's alright, I guess. Especially this year."

"Thank you, Miss Weasley, nothing further." The Headmaster said.

Harry had grabbed Madam Bones' arm and whispered. She stood and asked "Chief Warlock may I follow up briefly?"

"Proceed." Mr. Ogden allowed.

"Do you mean to say that the accused's attitude changed toward you this year?" asked Amelia.

Ginny gave a thoughtful nod.

Amelia considered then added "Would that change in behavior be about the same time as when you and Mr. Potter broke up?"

"Ahh...actually..." Ginny thought out loud "Umm...yeah...sounds right." Her face turned red with anger as she nodded "YES! DEFINITELY!! WHY YOU GREASY HAired ARS---"

Mr. Ogden gaveled her into silence "I caution you young lady!"

"Sorry, sir." Ginny replied meekly.

After excusing Ginny, Madam Bones called Ron, Hermione, Susan and Hannah. The testimony was basically the same, though Ron and Hermione could offer a more detailed history of problems between their friend and Professor Snape. Up next came Madam Pomfrey.

"How long have you been at Hogwarts?" Madam Bones asked.

The medi-witch replied "Twelve years as head of the hospital wing another seven before that."

"Nearly twenty years, impressive." Madam Bones commented, then "So, can we say that you have seen just about everything a school full of children could suffer?"

Dumbledore objected “Your pardon, but Tiberius, I would think everything is rather unlikely.”

“The prosecution will rephrase.” Mr. Ogden ruled, then “And the defense will address the court as Your Honor or Chief Warlock.”

Amelia nodded “Of course, Chief Warlock, my apologies. Madam Pomfrey, can you give us a quick sample of what you have dealt with during your career at Hogwarts?”

“Sure.” The medi-witch replied “An assortment of Muggle diseases, chicken pox, measles, colds. Magical ones such as Dragon pox. Injuries ranging from broken to lost bones, Acrolomanta bites, hexes, potion poisonings--”

Amelia held up her hand and said “I think that will do, thank you. Now, you have an extensive file on Harry Potter. Is that correct?”

“Oh, yes.” She replied with a sour expression. “To say that Mr. Potter is accident prone would be a serious understatement.”

Harry flushed and muttered “It’s not like I plan it.”

In response, a small ripple of amusement crossed the courtroom.

“My point being that you are well acquainted with the victim’s physical, mental and magical health.” Commented Amelia. To which the medi-witch nodded. Amelia continued “Fine...now, we come to what happened the night Harry was brought in to you. What was his condition?”

“Honestly, had it not been for his friends, Mr. Potter would either be in the Permanent Damage Ward of St. Mungo’s or dead.” Madam Pomfrey answered, raising gasps of shock from both the audience and the Wizengamot.

Amelia stayed silent, allowing the reaction to fill the courtroom. Then asked “And what was the cause of this condition?”

"In short, Mr. Potter could hear every thought in every mind around him." Madam Pomfrey explained "And while that might seem a great thing to the uninformed, no one could handle such an assault of information and remain sane."

Amelia nodded "And what caused this injury?"

"A repeated and violent use of the Legilimens spell." The medi-witch replied.

"And you are certain of that conclusion?" Amelia probed further. And after her confirmation said "Thank you Madam Pomfrey, nothing more."

Mr. Ogden glanced at Dumbledore and asked "Does the defense wish to cross?"

"Thank you, Your Honor." The Headmaster replied. Then addressing the witness "You've not often treated this condition, is that true?"

Madam Pomfrey stiffened at the question "Only a Mind Healer can treat it!" she snapped "It would be correct to say I diagnosed it."

"My point, Poppy, is that you have not seen Mr. Potter's type of injury often." Dumbledore said smoothly "Therefore how can you determine the cause?"

The medi-witch took even deeper offense "I have almost twenty years of experience and an additional five years training." She replied coldly "Explain why you are questioning my judgment, or retract the question!"

"Now, Poppy---" he began soothingly.

She cut him off "My name is Madam Pomfrey! Address me as such!"

"No more questions." Dumbledore sighed, looking defeated.

Madam Bones stood and announced "The Prosecution calls Harry Potter."

“About time!” Snape snarled as Harry passed him “End this farce Potter!”

Dumbledore put a restraining arm between them and whispered “Silence Severus!”

“Mr. Potter, you heard your friends’ testimony. Was any of it false or exaggerated?” asked Amelia.

Harry shook his head in denial. As Madam Bones instructed he replied calmly “No ma’am...from the first day I entered Hogwarts Professor Snape has bullied and insulted me every time I’m in his class. And if it wasn’t me he would insult my parents. Headmaster Dumbledore confirmed for me that he called my mother the M word when they were in school together. Uhhh...sorry for cursing.”

“You also heard Madam Pomfrey’s testimony concerning use of Legilimency as the cause of your injury. Yes?” she asked

Harry nodded “Yes, ma’am.”

“And has anyone used that spell on you?” she asked

Again, Harry nodded “Yes, ma’am, Professor Snape.”

“Has anyone else?” she followed up.

To which Harry shook his head “No, ma’am.”

“Nothing further, thank you Harry.” She said.

Dumbledore stood and gave him an ingratiating smile “Now, Harry” he asked “do you not think that this constant hostility between you and Professor Snape is uncalled for?”

“Yes, sir I do.” He replied “I don’t understand why he started it in the first place.”

The Headmaster shook his head sadly, saying “That is not what I meant. Professor Snape is a Hogwarts Professor and deserving of respect. You---”

“Why?” Harry cut him off “He’s never shown me any! What he did to me was worse than what the Dursleys did! He’s no better than Voldemort!” There were the customary gasps echoing through the courtroom, to which he rolled his eyes.

“I have repeatedly told you that Professor Snape has my complete faith, Harry.”

Losing his patience, Harry snapped “And why is that? He’s a Death Eater!”

“Was, Harry, WAS!” Dumbledore scolded him “And holding grudges concerning things which did not involve you is a sure path to darkness.”

Now angry, Harry fired back “You should tell him that! The bloody hook-nosed greaseball’s been doing that to me since day one!”

“Chief Warlock, does any of this have to do with the trial?” asked Amelia.

Before Mr. Ogden could answer, Harry continued---he actually gave her an annoyed look--- “And, you know what, that I’m going bad thing is getting old too!”

BANG! BANG! BANG! Went the gavel. “Enough, Mr. Potter.” The Chief Warlock ordered “Headmaster Dumbledore, either ask a relevant question or dismiss the witness.”

“Insolent brat!” shouted an angry Professor Snape “Chief Warlock! I demand to speak under Veratiserum!!”

No one in the courtroom heard the frustrated Headmaster whisper “That would be unwise Severus!”

"Get out of my way foolish old man!" the black-clad defendant snarled. Looking at Harry, he added "You were warned, boy!"

Madam Bones had told Harry the notion of "Give him enough rope to hang himself" So, he just sat there, not looking at Snape.

"Chief Warlock, I cannot protest strongly enough." Dumbledore objected "You must not allow this."

Madam Bones was rather surprised by the turn of events, but recovered immediately "Your Honor knows I have long favored using Veratiserum in trials. The Prosecution has no objection. Let us hear what the defendant has to say."

"So ordered." Mr. Ogden ruled.

Snape drew a vial from his robes and said "I happen to have a supply with me."

"Now that, I object to." Madam Bones said "I would prefer---"

Snape sneered at her "To use your sister-in-law's potions? I think not. Nothing from that usurper's---"

"Enough! Both of you!" Mr. Ogden gaveled them down "Amelia, you know better, that will be a twenty Galleon fine. The defendant is warned against such an outburst! Ministry supply will be used."

After being dosed, Dumbledore reluctantly approached and said "Very well, Severus, you asked for this. Say what you will."

"I can give you Sirius Black." Snape declared with a vengeful glare at Harry.

The courtroom fell silent. Dumbledore paled, shocked at the betrayal. He turned to restrain what he was sure would be an enraged Harry, but to his surprise, the boy had not moved.

"Thank you, Mr. Snape." Amelia said coolly "But, that will be quite unnecessary as Mr. Black turned himself in to me three days ago."



Still drugged, the defendant only sat there in the witness chair. But, both the gallery of onlookers and the Wizengamot burst into cross-talk. Even, despite his role, Mr. Ogden. But, finally, he recalled his function "That is enough!" he shouted. Then he addressed the prosecutor coldly "Madam Bones, kindly explain exactly why the Wizengamot was not informed of this."

"Of course, Your Honor, but first may I question the defendant? Veratiserum is limited in its potency." She replied.

"I object!" Dumbledore exclaimed.

Mr. Ogden countered "Overruled! Your client brought this on himself!"

"Mr. Snape, did you write a letter to Harry Potter concerning his testimony here, today?" Amelia asked.

Drugged, he replied "Yeth."

"Is this that letter?" she asked, handing him parchment.

Snape squinted at it and replied "Yeth."

"For the record" Madam Bones began "the letter says ..." she read directly from it (a/n: end of chap 29) "So essentially you were blackmailing Harry Potter into lying before the Wizengamot is that correct?"

Snape shook his head "Not a lie!" he snarled "The brat owes me for what that arrogant wretch of a father of his did to me!"

"Owes?" she repeated. Something clicked into place. It made no sense, except that it was logical. She gambled "How long have you been withdrawing from Harry Potter's vault?"

Compelled to answer, he replied "Right along, til three months ago. Owes me forty thousand Galleons!"

"FUCKING THIEF!!" Harry roared from his seat.

Mr. Ogden countered gaveled him down “Madam Bones control your client!” he ordered.

“My apologies, Chief Warlock.” She said “Well, well, I happen to have seen the Potters’ will and nowhere does it name you to have authority. Explain that to the court, Mr. Snape.”

Dizzy from the effort, but in full control again, Snape laughed bitterly and asked “What’s in it for me?”

“Nothing.” Amelia countered coldly “Chief Warlock, in addition to the Mind Rape charge against the defendant. I request the Wizengamot, based on the defendant’s own testimony, also convict Mr. Snape of massive embezzlement of my client’s vault. I can provide the exact figures later. Needless to say, I was not prepared for this development.”

“The Wizengamot will adjourn to consider including this new charge.” Mr. Ogden decided.

Dumbledore approached and asked “Amelia, might we speak privately?”

Coming next --- The Trial of Sirius Black

## 30 – The Trial of Sirius Black

Ron Weasley was in a profoundly strange situation. In fact, that applied to everyone in the group he was with. They all had two things in common today. One, they were the only underage people at the trial. The other, Harry Potter. With him was Hannah Abbott, who he was getting interested in. Complicating that was Hermione Granger, his former girlfriend. On the other hand, there was Harry's current girlfriend, Susan Bones and his own sister, Ginny, with whom he still had problems.

"Can you believe it? Snape ripping Harry off?"

Hermione couldn't suppress her sense of decorum "Honestly, Ronald, you really shouldn't---"

"I haven't heard bickering like that in a couple of years." Another voice interrupted "You two still at it?"

Ron shoved the hand that had landed on his shoulder "Butt out!" he snapped, then the face clicked "WOOD!"

"Good to see you, too, Weasley." The former Gryffindor captain replied, smiling "Looks like you're doing alright for yourself. Quite a group of beautiful ladies."

Ron grabbed the offered hand and shook it almost violently "Great to see you, too!" he exclaimed. "What brings you here?"

"Gotta register with the Department of Games." Oliver answered, proudly "You're looking at the new Reserve Keeper for the Chudley Canons!"

A bit of accidental magic lifted Ron off the floor "Un-BLOODY-believable!!" he exclaimed happily "Canons all the way!! Can I have an autograph?"

"Settle down...feet on the ground." Oliver said lightly "I swear that must be why they have us do this. Anything for a fellow Gryff. But only if you introduce me 'round."

Ron hurried through the introductions “Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones, they’re Hufflepuffs and Sue’s Harry’s girlfriend. You remember Hermione. And that’s my sister, Ginny.”

“The trademark red hair.” He observed, giving her a charming smile. “So...not that I’m McGonagall or anything...But, what’re a group of Hogwarts students doing out of school?”

Hermione shot a glare his way and asked “Oliver, don’t you read the news?”

“Not for the past few months, my dear. Training camp leaves you a bit isolated” He replied, smoothly, completely unaffected by her tone. “But, I have a bit of free time. I’d love to hear about it...So, Ginny, you know that shade looks much better on you than it ever did on your brothers.” He slid into the seat next to hers.

And while the group talked .....

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“Now, Amelia” said Dumbledore as he closed the door to the conference room “surely we can come to an accommodation. With—“

She cut him off “Don’t patronize me, Dumbledore! I frankly don’t even know if I’m willing to offer a deal here. Your client sunk himself when he opened his mouth.”

“Do not talk about me as if I am not in this room!” Snape protested angrily “It is by no means my fault that Potter cannot even master the most basic principles of Occulumency!”

Amelia ignored the outburst “You may know Occulumency, but you are in no way qualified to teach it.” She said “And, you, Headmaster, had no place requiring Harry to learn it. And certainly not at the hands of someone who holds a petty grudge against a child because of what his parents did.”

"I must reveal something I had not planned to." The Headmaster offered "With the return to power of Lord Voldemort, Severus plays a vital role of offering much needed information on Death Eater activity."

Harry went off at that point "So that gives him the right to insult me and my friends for years!" he yelled "And after what he did to me! Azkaban's too good! I say Avada him!! And I get everything the bastard owns!!!"

"Calm down, Harry." Amelia insisted "Tell me, Dumbledore, not many people have the power to set aside a will. Cornelius, me, Tiberius, our mutual enemy Delores, and no one in the position to do so fifteen years ago. Except, that is, the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot.

The Headmaster's hand disappeared into his robes "Come, come, my dear" he said placatingly "There is no---"

"Don't even think about it!" Madam Bones snapped, pulling her wand and training it on him. "Put both hands on the table!"

Dumbledore chuckled lightly "Surely, Amelia, you do not believe I was planning on dueling you."

"Let's just say I prefer to be on the safe side." She countered "As I see it both of you are on the hook for this mess. Harry and I have been busy trying to determine what has happened to his trust vault every year. We found some curious results. Plus Lily and James Potter's will made for interesting reading."

The Headmaster paled "Just how would you know the terms of that?" he asked.

"Not really your business, Albus." She replied coldly "What I do know is that nowhere can it be found that your client was to have control of Harry's vault. He should be glad they were smart enough to set up that trust vault, otherwise Harry would be in the poor house by now. Also, there is the custody clause in which the will forbade him going to his mother's sister. Which brings me to Sirius Black."

Dumbledore gave a patient, grandfatherly smile and said “Ahh...there, I think, we have a possible problem. I could see my way clear to publicly support his release if---”

“You’re as bad as Snape!” Harry yelled. “YOU---“

“Shut up, Potter!” the Potion Master sneered.

Dumbledore turned an angry expression to Harry and said “First, Harry, remember Professor Snape is your teacher.”

“Not anymore!” Harry argued “Sue’s mother is a million times better!”

“Were we in school, I would be forced to deduct points for your outburst.” Dumbledore warned him.

Harry shrugged at that “Who cares.” He said “I want him out of my life!”

“Harry, Professor Snape could turn in your Godfather.” Dumbledore reminded him “Perhaps you should---”

“And that is the most despicable thing of all!” Madam Bones exclaimed “But, as I said in court, that threat is irrelevant. Mr. Black will have his day in court. Back to the matter at hand, we know for certain that Harry’s vault has been drained completely in each of the last fifteen years. It is now obvious that Severus Snape here is our long missing executor. If he repays double the stolen---“

Harry interrupted “Not good enough. Triple.”

“Yes, I believe you are right.” Madam Bones said, rather surprised “If the defendant repays triple what he stole---“

This time it was Dumbledore “Amelia, surely that is too harsh.”

“Well that is for you and him to work out.” She replied “I know the Dumbledores are quite wealthy. Perhaps you should offer to help. As I was saying---Yes five million Galleons, that should be sufficient---“

Then I would support allowing the sentence for Embezzlement to be served simultaneously with the Mental Rape sentence.”

Snape growled “I will not be blackmailed this way!”

“You seemed perfectly willing to do that to Harry.” Madam Bones said coldly “Well...take it or leave it.”

“Surely, Amelia---” Dumbledore began.

That was when Snape threw caution to the wind. He shoved his own attorney and seized his wand. In a fraction of a second he had the tip of Dumbledore’s wand pressed against Harry’s neck “Now we do things my way!” he snarled “Bones! You lead me out of this building! I’ll apparate away and you can keep Potter! If not, I will do the Dark Lord a favor!”

“Now be reasonable, Severus!” the shocked Headmaster pleaded.

“Foolish old man!” Snape hissed.

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Oliver Wood had just departed. Despite Ginny’s insistence that she had a boyfriend, he had managed to convince her to come to a Canons’ game as his guest. The group was just about to return to the courtroom when a commotion erupted in the Ministry Courtyard.

“HARRY!!” Susan screamed at the sight of her boyfriend being held at wandpoint.

Snape gave her a malicious look “Excellent!” he sneered “Disobey me Potter and she’ll die! Avada Kedavra!!”

“SUSAN!!” Harry cried. The curse hit the ground right between her feet.

“Drop it Snape!” an Auror ordered.

He looked at the MLE Director and said "Well, Bones. Make no mistake, I never miss. Drop those wards. Now!"

"Do it!" Madam Bones ordered. "Mark my words. You harm my niece and I will put a bounty on your head so large your own mother would turn you in!"

Feeling the anti-apparation wards collapse, Snape yanked Harry close to him and said "Always remember, you caused this!" He pointed his wand at Susan and yelled "CRUCIO!!" Then with everyone distracted, vanished with a faint –pop!

"NOO!!!" Harry cried. And in that fraction of a second, two more quick pops were heard as he vanished and reappeared mere inches from his girlfriend. The curse struck him in the back, turning his cry of protest to one of agony "AHHHH!!!"

Susan knelt down beside him, deeply pained to see him suffering. She reached forward to comfort him "Harry---" she said.

"Don't --- touch ---- me!" he growled through the pain.

Madam Bones rushed forward and pulled her niece away "You mustn't!" she warned.

"Finite Incantatum!" one of the Aurors cast at Harry. The purple glow faded in a few seconds.

Harry felt his muscles begin to un-knot themselves and he began to relax. He was aware of hands grabbing and lifting him off the marble floor of the courtyard. "I swear...I'm gonna...kill...that bastard!" he panted.

"That was the dumbest, stupidest, foolish thing!" Susan sobbed as she tenderly embraced him.

Harry chuckled weakly "Don't think that's a word. But I like it here." He ground his nose into the swell of her breasts.

"Harry!!" she protested "There's a hundred people here!!"



He laughed, feeling giddy "Tell'em to go'way!" his muffled voice replied. He tried to wrap his arms around her, but his muscles wouldn't obey.

"Speaker Bones" a young page approached and said "The Wizengamot wants to resume the hearing immediately."

Amelia held back a display of temper. It wasn't the girl's fault. She said "Please inform Mr. Ogden we will make our way there as rapidly as Mr. Potter's condition allows."

"Yes, ma'am." She curtsied and departed.

With a grunt of effort, Harry said "That's alright...I can go."

"That's remarkable!" a surprised Amelia exclaimed "Harry, you should hardly be able to stand!"

The raven-haired boy shrugged and commented "Voldemort's was a lot worse." He pushed himself off the table they had put in on and his knees promptly buckled.

"But you could use a little help." said Susan as she supported his weight.

He smeared his lips over hers and replied "Nah! Just wanted you to catch me!"

"I-I d-don't know what to say, Harry." She stammered "Y-y-you d-didn't have to....y'know...what y-you d-did. Thank you."

Harry blushed and said "Welcome."

"Enough of this gushy stuff." Ron muttered. He grabbed one of Harry's arms and tossed it around his neck.

Harry gave him a lop-sided smile "Hey Ron!" he exclaimed "No offense, mate. But your hair's a totally different shade from Sue. Ain't kissin' ya!"

“And he ain’t even drunk.” Ron groaned “Don’t give him Firewhiskey.”

As Susan and Ron turned him around to guide him back to the courtroom Harry drunkenly took roll “Hey Hannah! Yo Mione! You, too, Gin!”

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“Well, this is not the normal result of a trial.” Mr. Ogden said from the Chief Warlock chair “This entire situation is highly suspicious. Severus Snape, regardless of his Potions qualifications, should never have been allowed to teach Occulumency to a student who he has a personal grudge against. In the matter of Mental Rape of Harry Potter, the Wizengamot finds Mr. Snape guilty. For the record the vote was 32-14.”

Ron yelled “BUSTED!!” happily. His outburst led to others.

“Silence!” Mr. Ogden demanded “As the convict has chosen to flee...the maximum sentence of not less than twenty years is hereby imposed. The sentence will begin when the convict has been recaptured. Madam Bones, as Director of Magical Law Enforcement, you are authorized and required to seek Mr. Snape.”

Amelia nodded and replied “Yes, Your Honor.”

“In connection with that matter, as Headmaster Dumbledore initiated said lessons, he is directed to submit to the court an explanation---”

Dumbledore interrupted “Tiberius, I must protest---”

“Silence!” Mr. Ogden gaveled him “You have thirty days to comply. Next, regarding this matter of Mr. Snape removing funds from Mr. Potter’s account. First, the Wizengamot orders Gringotts to supply records to explain that. And second, all property of Mr. Snape is to be turned over to Mr. Potter---”

Dumbledore protested “Tiberius, my client is not here to defend himself!!”

“That is not the court’s fault.” Mr. Ogden said, dismissively “If your client wants to object, he has forty-eight hours to turn himself in. Then, the case may be tried.”

“And how would my client learn of this ruling?” asked Dumbledore in the same manner.

Mr. Ogden glared at the Headmaster “First, that will be a twenty Galleon fine for contempt. In answer to your question...take out an advert in the Prophet or the Quibbler. Next, is the matter of Sirius Black. Mr. Snape stated he knew the escaped prisoner’s whereabouts and implied that Mr. Potter did as well.”

“If I may, Your Honor” Madam Bones stood and interrupted “Mr. Black turned himself in to me of his own free will. And is currently in my room at Hogwarts.”

The gallery practically exploded in surprised speculation “Why would he do that!?” “Is my son safe?!” “How did he get in!?”

“I will gladly explain.” She said “First, everyone please know that Mr. Black was guarded at all times by at least two top Aurors. Even assuming the worst, at no time was any student at risk. Second, as I said, Mr. Black turned himself in freely and unconditionally.”

With the conclusion of Snape’s trial, Dumbledore had resumed his place as Chief Warlock “The overriding question appears to be why, Amelia.” He said mildly. “Additionally, I would ask, why is it you did not inform me as Headmaster of Hogwarts of an additional guest on school grounds?”

“I really don’t think we should air that publicly at this time, Chief Warlock.” She argued “Let me just mention that your former client threatened to reveal Mr. Black’s location in an effort to pressure Mr. Potter into giving false testimony today.”

Dumbledore hid his discomfort. This day was not going well. “We cannot conduct a hearing on the matter without the accused present.” He said.

“Allow me two minutes with the Wizengamot Floo.” Madam Bones countered.

Dumbledore sighed “Very well.”

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Muted whispers filled the packed courtroom as the notorious Sirius Black (Muggle Mass Murderer, You-Know-Who Supporter and Betrayer) entered. He entered unshackled and followed by Tonks. All the other Aurors present brought out their wands. Tonks pointed Sirius to the Defendants’ Table and sat him down. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief that the vicious criminal didn’t do anything. What—again-- set the courtroom abuzz was when Harry Potter, the victim of Black’s betrayal, went over and sat beside him.

“Chief Warlock, are you going to name a prosecutor?” one of the Wizengamot asked.

Dumbledore nodded “Of course, Cyrus, you may take on that role if you wish.”

“Very well.” The Wizengamot member replied “Cyrus Greengrass for the prosecution.” And, speaking while walking, he said “I object on the basis of lack of time to prepare a case.”

“That is sustained.” Replied Dumbledore.

Madam Bones stood “Chief Warlock, if I may,” she said “Mr. Black, on the charge of escaping from Azkaban, how do you plead?”

Sirius stood and replied “Guilty.”

“Then, forgive me...” Mr. Greengrass said “...but what else is there to argue. By rights we should simply turn the accused over to the Dementors.”

Sirius paled and fell back into his chair.

“HEY!” Harry exclaimed, giving the man a nasty look.

Madam Bones put a restraining hand on his shoulder and said “Chief Warlock, it is not the matter of the escape we wish to argue. But the original conviction.”

“That case was fifteen years ago.” Mr. Greengrass commented “Why, in all that time, all appeals are surely exhausted.”

Madam Bones nodded her head “I would say so, too.” She acknowledged “And that would be why I obtained a copy of the entire case against Mr. Black. Shall I read it?”

“I object to that, Chief Warlock.” Mr. Greengrass said “That would surely take too much of the court’s time.”

Dumbledore nodded “I would have to agree, Amelia.”

“Actually, it is only a couple of feet of parchment.” She argued “It would take maybe ten minutes.”

The prosecutor’s eyebrows shot up at that. Incredulous, he asked “That is the ENTIRE file!?!?” At Amelia’s nod he added “I withdraw my objection.”

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“It starts with Mr. Black appearing in whatever courtroom the hearing was---” She began

Black: What the bloody hell!?

Crouch: The defendant will be silent!”

Black: Defendant!?! What! WHY? HOW??

Crouch: I will ask the questions! You will answer! You are accused of the murder of thirteen Muggles plus one Wizard! Your plea!

Black: That’s absurd!

Crouch: Guilty? Yes or No!

Black: Not guilty!

Crouch: Better. Were you at the site of said murders?

Black: Yes, but---

Crouch: Did you use your wand in the presence of Muggles?

Black: To stop---

Crouch: Yes or No!

Black: Yes

Crouch: Then you are guilty of violating the Secrecy Statutes. So noted.

Black: Don't I get an attorney!?

Crouch: There was another Wizard present, correct?

Black: Peter Pettigrew. I want an attorney!

Crouch: Where is Pettigrew now?

Black: He should be dead! He sold Lily and James to Voldemort!!

Crouch: So you were after him. So noted. Where is Pettigrew now?

Black: He turned himself into a rat and vanished into the sewer.

Crouch: There is no record of Pettigrew being an Animagus. That statement is stricken.

Black: Where's my attorney?

Crouch: If you cannot produce Pettigrew or inform the court of his whereabouts you risk summary conviction.

Black: I ain't saying another word without a top notch lawyer here! NOW!

Crouch: Aurors the accused is becoming violent! Subdue him!

Black: ALBUS!

Auror stuns Black

Crouch: The accused...having refused to answer...is hereby found guilty of fourteen murders. Out of consideration for the Noble House of Black, the death sentence is commuted. Life in Azkaban! No possibility of Parole! Next case!

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"That's all there is." Madam Bones concluded.

Harry shot a lethal look at Dumbledore, but Sirius squeezed his leg harshly. He held his tongue.

"What!" an appalled prosecutor shouted "Where are the appeals? Was there no review? How could this have happened?"

Madam Bones gave Mr. Greengrass a tolerant look and said "You are not to blame, Cyrus. And those were very troubled times."

"Chief Warlock, the prosecution is willing to make any reasonable accommodation." Mr. Greengrass said "I would assume that Madam Bones has a suggestion in mind. Admittedly, we do not always agree. But I don't think anyone would question her ability."

Dumbledore didn't look especially pleased, but could only say "Amelia?"

"Your Honor, I propose to briefly question Harry Potter. Then, I will call Mr. Black and question him under Veratiserum." She answered.

Dumbledore looked at the prosecutor and prompted “Cyrus?”

“I have always been opposed to the use of the truth potion in a trial.” The prosecutor said, thoughtfully. “However, no law prohibits it...As long as I may cross-examine...Justice should be satisfied.”

After he took the stand Madam Bones asked “Harry, when did you first hear about Sirius Black?”

“On the Muggle news.” He answered, feeling rather frustrated that she started there.

“Go on.” She prodded.

Harry sighed “The Ministry put it out to the Muggle world that he escaped from prison and that anyone seeing him should call the police.”

“You learned more about him when you returned for school?” she asked.

Harry nodded “Yeah, Mr. Weasley warned me not to go looking for him.”

“By whom, you mean the father of the two Weasleys that testified earlier today?” she asked. To which Harry nodded. “Let’s move up, then...When did you meet Sirius Black?”

That was a night of mixed feelings for him. But, Harry found himself smiling. “Right at the end of Third Year.” He replied “Sirius had chased down my friend Ron’s rat and cornered him in the Shrieking Shack.”

“The transcript from Mr. Black’s trial also mentions a rat.” She noted. “Is there a connection?”

Now Harry was smiling widely “Yup!” he exclaimed. “The same one! Peter Pettigrew!”



“Let us be very clear, now. Did you actually see Peter Pettigrew?” asked Madam Bones.

Harry was feeling quite good at the moment. “Yes, ma’am, we all saw him change from Scabbers to Pettigrew.” He said.

“Would you clarify, please?” she asked “Who is Scabbers? And, who is We?”

“My two best friends, Ron and Hermione were there. So was Remus Lupin.” He replied “And...yeah...Snape was, too.”

Mr. Greengrass stood and said “Chief Warlock, I object. While we can certainly call Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger, neither Mr. Lupin nor Snape are present.”

“Objection sustained.” Dumbledore ruled “Please disregard the references to Mr. Lupin and Professor Snape. And Harry, we have discussed this several times you will---”

Harry couldn’t believe it. He rolled his eyes and glared at the Headmaster “Don’t tell me you’re still on about that greasy-haired git! I don’t owe a bloody thing to someone who ripped me off all my life!!”

“That is quite enough, Harry.” Dumbledore said icily “Now apologize to the court.”

Rebelliously, Harry retorted “No. I meant what I said about Snape!”

“That will be a fifty Galleon fine, Mr. Potter.” Dumbledore ordered.

Harry shrugged it off “Take it out of what Snape owes me.”

“We shall discuss this later, in private.” Dumbledore said. “Madam Bones, proceed.”

Harry got in the final word “Not without my attorney present.”

“No more questions.” Amelia said.

Mr. Greengrass took over “Mr. Potter, I would like you to understand that our system of justice requires this type of confrontation. Two people on different sides of an argument. The ultimate goal is to find the truth. I personally, am not your enemy. Nor am I Madam Bones’ enemy. Nor am I even Mr. Black’s enemy. But, just as someone who is on trial for a crime is entitled to representation---”

“Sirius didn’t get any in that trial.” Harry cut him off. There was more than a hint of hostility in his comment.

Ignoring the tone, Mr. Greengrass continued “As I was saying...a person on trial is entitled to representation. So, is the Ministry. And, so you know I happen to agree, that trial was not normal. But, let’s deal with the present. Mr. Black was convicted of, besides fourteen murders, being the main accomplice in You-Know-Who’s killing of your parents. Why would you testify on his behalf?”

“Because it wasn’t him.” Harry replied “It was Pettigrew.”

“And how could you know that?” asked Mr. Greengrass “You were barely a year old.”

“That night, in the Shrieking Shack, after he changed back into Pettigrew...he admitted it.” Harry answered.

In a standard questioning tactic, Mr. Greengrass said “But, there weren’t any other witnesses, were there?”

“Not true!” Harry exclaimed “I said Ron, Hermione, Remus and Snape were there too!”

The prosecutor nodded “Ahh...sorry...I do recall that. Just one more thing, then. Mr. Potter, it is a matter of record that Mr. Black is your Godfather.”

“Yeah. So?” asked Harry.

“Simply this...” Mr. Greengrass replied “If we assume for a moment that Mr. Black is freed, then he could claim certain parental rights for you. There are two that come to mind. He might have the right to

determine where...and with whom...you live when school is out of session.”

Harry grinned at that “I’d rather live with Sirius than my lousy Aunt’s family.”

“Are you anti-Muggle, Mr. Potter?” the prosecutor asked.

Harry gave him a dirty look and snapped “No! One of my two best friends is Muggleborn. So’s Madam Bones and my girlfriend’s Mother and mine too! If anything, I think some Purebloods are more the problem. Look at Malfoy. I just hate my Aunt, Uncle and cousin.”

“I see.” Mr Greengrass said, rather frostily “No further questions.”

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While Harry was being questioned, Sirius had been dosed with Veratiserum. He was dragged into the witness chair by two Aurors.

“Mr. Black, what is your relationship to Harry Potter?” asked Madam Bones.

Sirius slurred out “I his Godfather.”

“Potters and Blacks rarely mixed.” She said “How do you explain that?”

Sirius’ head slumped “Goo’ole ‘ames me bestest mate.” He said sadly

“You are referring to James Potter, I assume?” she asked.

“Yeth.” Sirius replied, nodding.

“There were, in fact, four of you...best friends through Hogwarts...is that correct?” she asked.

Sirius nodded “Yup! Me, Remus, James and Pettigrew.” The last name was spat out like a curse.

“Let’s move forward.” Madam Bones commented “About August 1981, Lily and James Potter went into hiding. Were you the Potters’ Secret Keeper?”

Sirius shook his head “Uh-uh!” he denied “Was too obvi-obvi...uhh...easy. They pik-ted Pettigrew. TRAITOR!”

“So, Peter Pettigrew betrayed the Potters to Voldemort?” she asked.

Sirius nodded “Yeth!”

“And what did you do when you learned of the Potters’ murder?” asked Madam Bones.

“Evr-one party!” the witness spat angrily “Jus’ wanted to kill da RAT-BASSSTARD!!”

Following up, she asked “But, you didn’t. Did you?”

“Rat frame-ded me!” Sirius snarled “Woked up looking at Crouch’s ugly mug!”

A little ripple of laughter traveled through the courtroom.

“Why did you escape from Azkaban?” she asked.

“Seen rat in Prophet.” Sirius declared. “Ron pet. Save Harry.”

“Just one last question, Mr. Black. You have been out of Azkaban for nearly three years, now. Have you committed any crime whatsoever?” asked Amelia.

Sirius shook his head and replied “Nope!”

“Thank you.” Amelia said as she sat.

Mr. Greengrass stood and asked “But, you do acknowledge escaping from Azkaban. That is true?”

“Yeth.” Was Sirius’ slurred replied

“And you did have your wand out in a Muggle area.” Mr. Greengrass said “That is also true, is it not?”

Sirius nodded, a little wildly.

“And you did state that you were after Peter Pettigrew that night, true?” the prosecutor asked “So, would you have killed him then, if you could?”

Still firmly in the grip of the truth potion, Sirius replied “Yeth and Yeth.”

“No more questions.” Mr. Greengrass said and he sat.

Dumbledore looked to the witness stand and said “The witness is excused.”

“Bloody Veratiserum!” Sirius complained as he stood. “Firewhiskey hangover without the fun.”

Those nearest the front of the courtroom chuckled.

“I have nothing further, Chief Warlock.” Madam Bones said.

Dumbledore looked at the prosecutor and asked “And you, Cyrus?”

“To be perfectly honest, I cannot...in good conscience...argue a guilty verdict with what we have heard.” Mr. Greengrass announced “I move that the case be suspended until additional evidence, if any, is found. Though, I think, the Ministry should have authority to reopen it.”

Mixed sounds came from the spectators. Murmurs of protest argued with simple surprise and sounds of approval. No one reaction dominated.

Dumbledore looked at Madam Bones and asked “Amelia? The defense’s position?”

"No objection, Chief Warlock." Madam Bones replied. She looked as if she couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. A rare occurrence given her dual positions in Wizarding Government.

Harry didn't understand at all, he tugged on her sleeve and asked "What's going on?"

"Are there any objections from the Wizengamot?" asked Dumbledore. After a moment of silence the Chief Warlock hammered his gavel a couple of times and said "Sirius Black, you are released on the condition you check in not more than weekly with an Auror."

Sirius lit up with delight. Harry hooted with glee and jumped into his Godfather's arms.

Hey look! No cliffie! --- Small preview Seamus screaming that he hates Harry.

## 32 – The Trial of Seamus Finnegan

The next day, Harry awoke in his four-poster in the Hufflepuff Fifth Year dormitory. He had rarely woken up so happy and at peace with the world. "Morning mates!" he yelled.

"Shaddup Potter!" Justin Finch-Fletchley grumbled. And his complaint was echoed by the other boys.

Harry was showered and dressed before anyone else in the dormitory. He tunelessly whistled his way to the Commonroom. Seeing a thatch of bright red hair, he covered her eyes and flippantly asked "Guess who?"

"Must be my other boyfriend." the victim taunted "Way too cheerful to be Harry."

In one motion, he lightly punched her shoulder and kissed the top of her head. Then he tossed himself over the back of the velvet covered couch and landed his head in her lap. "Its a bloody brilliant day!" he declared.

"Well you're in a mood." Susan said, amusedly.

Hannah Abbott, sitting in a chair next to them, giggled and said "Yeah...who are you and what have you done with Harry Potter?"

"Am I really that bad?" he asked.

The blond girl shrugged "Not exactly what I meant, Harry." She said "We're just...it's that...you're--"

"---moody?? Kranky?? Gru---" asked Harry cheerfully. Susan swatted his chest and he laughed "What! Can't I just be happy?! For once everything's worked out for me."

She bent over and kissed him "Well, I'm happy you're happy." She said "Shall we go to breakfast?"

“Sounds wonderful.” Harry replied. He sat up and sprung to his feet then offered a hand to Susan. He pulled her off the couch and they made their way to the Great Hall.

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“What’d you do to Ginny, Potter?” was the first thing the three heard. It was Marion, a girl from the same Fourth Year girl’s dorm as Ginny.

All three of them frowned at the Gryffindor girl. Though, Harry’s mood was hard to get through “And it’s nice to see your smiling face.” He said.

The former couple had made a peace of sorts after returning from the dual trial. Ginny’s testimony had helped convict Severus Snape. Though escaped, the former Potions Master was now gone from Hogwarts and he was now a hunted, penniless Death Eater. “Leave it alone, Marion.” Ginny told her friend “Come sit with me, Seamus, Neville and Luna.”

“I can NOT believe you!” The other Fourth Year complained as they walked away. “What’re you doing making nice with them?!”

Ginny rolled her eyes “Marion, I told you last night.” She grumbled “I’m not trying to make friends. But, I never really cared for all this fighting. Especially with my brothers.”

“Potter giving you a hard time again, Gi---” began her boyfriend.

But, Neville cut him off “This is getting real old, Seamus.”

“I must agree.” Luna said airily “You, my friend, are risking a nerfherder invasion.”

Seamus shot the Ravenclaw a nasty look and snarled “Shut up, freak!”

“That wasn’t nice!” an angry Ginny snapped.



Neville was more violent. He drew his wand under the table and fired an orange colored spell which toppled Seamus back over his chair and had him pinned, gripping his stomach.

“Mr. Longbottom!” shouted Professor McGonagall “Release Mr. Finnegan at once!!”

Neville protested “But, Professor! He insulted Luna!!”

“Then I will address that.” She scolded him “That will be ten points from Gryffindor and three days detention.”

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Harry found the incident rather amusing. He hid a chuckle in Susan’s shoulder. He and Susan had opted to sit at the Gryffindor table this morning. Across from them sat Ron and Hannah, a budding new Gryffindor/Hufflepuff relationship. Hermione, who now rarely sat with her House, was back to back with Harry at the Ravenclaw table.

“You, Mr. Potter, seem quite pleased with other people’s suffering.” The, to him, grating voice of Madam Umbridge commented.

Harry turned and shot her an unpleasant look. If he didn’t have much respect left for the Headmaster and his Head of House, he wasn’t going to even try with her. “Doesn’t look all that severe to me.” He commented “Nothing, compared to ---oh--- a Crucio...or a Blood Quill.”

“You may think you have things your own way, boy.” She glared down at him “But, I assure you---”

Harry slapped the table angrily and stood up. He hated being called ‘boy’ it reminded him too much of the Dursleys. “You’re not a professor!” he snarled down at her “I don’t have to put up with you!”

“How dare you!?” the outraged High Inquisitor roared. She went for her wand.

Harry's speed had only improved with running the Defense League. He yelled "Expelliarmus!" blasting Umbridge half the length of the Hall. Much to the delight of most of the students. Even some Slytherins.

"SIIIIILENCE!!!" the Headmaster bellowed over the cheering. Then into the quiet, he added "Poppy, would you kindly see to Madam Umbridge. I will see you, Mr. Potter, in my office. Report there immediately."

In spite of the unspoken cease fire between them, Draco Malfoy couldn't pass up taunting "Now you're gonna get it!" as Harry passed.

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"We'll be spending the rest of the term reviewing for your OWLs." The now permanent Potion Mistress was saying.

A class groan was interrupted by Harry's entrance. "Sorry, Professor Bones." He said "I've got a note from Dumbledore."

"Of course, Mr. Potter." She replied "Take your seat...Now, I plan on covering the most likely potions you will be called upon to brew. Certainly one of the household cleaning ones. They are---- Perhaps you would like to share with the rest of the class Mr. Malfoy!"

"Cleaning is for House-elves, or women." Draco replied arrogantly.

That comment brought boos and hisses from every girl regardless of House.

"That's quite enough, class!" Professor Bones demanded "Mr. Malfoy is certainly free to hold his own opinions! But, I would point out two things. First, most of my friends would never have married their husbands if they didn't at least know their way around the kitchen. Second, regardless of your opinion, Mr. Malfoy, your OWL score may depend on it."

After raising her hand, Daphne asked "Professor, you're not gonna let him get away with that, are you?"

“Miss Greengrass, it is not my job as a professor to change a pupil’s beliefs.” replied Professor Bones “I leave that to the lucky witch who catches Mr. Malfoy’s affections.

No one could quite tell if their professor was being sarcastic or not.

“And, I recognize you had an interesting morning, Mr. Potter.” She added “But, let’s not discuss that on class time.”

Harry gave an embarrassed nod and said “Yes, ma’am. Sorry.”

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“And, yeah, again...” Harry was winding down his tale of his session with the Headmaster “... he’s got this stupid theory about me hexing someone in self-defense is going to somehow turn me evil.”

Susan’s sister, Tina, from her perch on Harry’s shoulders chimed in “I think it was cool! You shoulda blasted her through the wall!”

“Hush you!” Harry retorted as he pinched her knees.

Tina squealed in protest and bounced a fist off his head.

“You be careful up there.” Joan scolded her daughter.

Harry laughed “Don’t worry...I got her...” then he resumed his summary “And then he goes into Snape AGAIN! Like it’s my fault the greasy haired git showed he was on Voldemort’s side!”

“I really wish you wouldn’t use that name.” an exasperated Joan complained.

Harry fell into his female best friend’s tone of voice “Professor Bones...it’s like Hermione said Fear of a name only inspires fear of the thing itself.”

“I don’t think you should imitate Hermione.” Susan commented, greatly amused. The rest of the group laughed along with them.

As they turned the corner into the Great Hall, Harry lifted Tina off his shoulders. "Alright...now I'm worried." He said "No Ron, the Twins, Ginny, not even Mr. Prewett. And I know for a fact, Hermione's never cut a class. I don't think she knows how to."

"DO you believe no one else needs to eat, Mr. Potter?" asked Madam Umbridge.

Harry gave her a confused look "Huh?"

"Move Potter!" Seamus Finnegan exclaimed. He elbowed Harry as he passed.

Harry glared at the boy's back and took a menacing step forward.

"Tsk, tsk, Mr. Potter." The pink-clad witch clucked "Attacking a student is against school rules. Doing so from behind is in abominable bad taste."

Harry turned his angry look on her and growled "Get outta my way!"

"That will be one hundred points from Gryffindor." Madam Umbridge declared in her sweetest tone.

Susan's mother got between them "Hem! Hem!" she mocked "First, Harry, why don't you find a seat. Now...Delores---"

"I would think you would appreciate some additional authority." Umbridge interrupted smoothly.

Giving the same sugary smile, Joan countered "I have all the authority I need as a professor. And, Mr. Finnegan, that will be fifteen points from Gryffindor for shoving Mr. Potter. Plus, I think a night's detention with Mr. Filch. Finally, I am awarding Mr. Potter one hundred and one points for...for...an excellent display of self restraint."

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As lunch was winding down a commotion disrupted the various conversations. At that moment, Harry happened to have been helping Tina with her Defense homework. A spell exploded against the bewitched ceiling in a display of orange fireworks. He pushed the girl off her seat and covered her. Something of an overreaction as the spell was nowhere near them.

“Incarcerous!” it was Ron’s voice. The spell made the dull thumping sound of impacting with a shield.

Hermione’s voice overlapped “Stop! Come on, Ginny! Be reasonable!! Taratellegra!!”

“Ron! Hermione! Wha’th---” Harry stuck his head up just in time to get hit. His legs immediately went all rubbery.

Ginny, wand out, burst into the Great Hall yelling “I don’t want to fight you! Protego!” In spite of having started out late, she had worked hard in Harry’s Defense League and was a match for anyone in the group except Harry. Plus, unlike her pursuers, Ginny was built for speed.

“Miss Weasley! Drop your wand!” the Head of Hufflepuff commanded.

Ginny growled impatiently and said “Sorry Professor Sprout! Expelliarmus!” The spell was perfectly aimed, neatly disarmed the teacher, but did no damage. “Seeeeaaaamuuusssssss! Where are you, dear?”

“Hi Gin!” the Irish boy announced cheerily from his spot at the Gryffindor table. He stood and was immediately blasted by a curse. His body slammed into one of the pillars and he slumped down, unconscious.

Ginny stomped her foot and cursed “Shit! I wanted the little toad awake!!”

“GINNY!” Ron appeared and tackled his sister before she could do anything else.

The petite girl almost succeeded in throwing her larger brother off “Lemme go, Ron!” Then, Hermione, George and Fred, by weight of sheer numbers physically immobilized her. Each one pinned a limb to the marble floor.

“Well, well” commented Susan, looking rather amused at the scene “Wonder what brought this on.”

Ginny’s neck came up and she gave her an ugly look, but focused on one of the twins “Come on Fred! How many times you say you wanted to kill’im?!?”

“What is the meaning of this outrage!?!” a furious Professor McGonagall demanded “Students attack---”

“Misters Weasley, kindly take your sister to a classroom.” Dumbledore ordered, overriding the Head of Gryffindor “Minerva, perhaps you would assist Poppy in getting Mr. Finnegan to the Hospital Wing.”

McGonagall nodded and said “Oh...yes, of course.. Professor Dumbledore.” She trained her wand on the prone Irish boy, cast Mobilicorpus and with the help of Madam Pomfrey floated Seamus out of the Hall.

Naturally, the moment Seamus could no longer be seen, speculation erupted to the point of rattling the windows. But only moments passed before the enchanted ceiling exploded in a brilliant flash of lightning and a deafening clap of thunder. “Lunch is over!” Professor Weasley declared “Report to you next classes! And Potter, I know you are involved somehow!!”

“Weasley’s lost it!” laughed Draco Malfoy “Even I saw Potter the whole time!”

Harry was struck dumb. He could only sit there gaping and trying to get his mind around the concept of Malfoy defending him. They were less enemies than they had been. But that didn’t mean they were friends.

“That will be fifteen points from Slytherin, Mr. Malfoy.” Percy said tightly. Then, “And I believe all of you are due in my class. Is that not correct, Potter?”

Tina muttered under her breath “Luckily I’m in Potions.”

“What was that?” asked Percy, with a slight sneer.

At that moment, Tina’s Ravenclaw friends came up, giggling, and spirited her away. They all looked back at Harry as they exited the Great Hall and giggled more, then vanished.

“And that will be five points from Hufflepuff for your sister’s cheek, Miss Bones.” He declared.

Susan, who cared for the current Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor about as much as she did the previous, shot back “And how do you justify that?”

“Now that will be a detention with Mr. Filch for your cheek.” He added.

Susan held her tongue, she had every intention of disputing that. But, she decided to let it be a surprise. What she found really annoying was that Percy had decided to dog their heels all the way to class. Hannah had been quite happy to split off to Professor Trelawney’s class.

“Today, class,” announced Percy as he entered the classroom behind Harry and Susan “we will be reviewing for your OWL exams. I want you studying your First Year textbook. Again, there will be no need for wands. Raise your hand if you have any questions.”

Susan, from across the room, rolled her eyes at Harry. It had taken Professor Weasley about a week to rearrange the seating to separate the couple. Behind Percy’s back, Harry crossed his eyes at his girlfriend and twisted his lips. Susan barely repressed a giggle.

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Reading his First Year textbook was worse than History of Magic for Harry, so he actually welcomed what was mostly a yawn-fest of Professor Binns. The other, and bigger, plus, was that it was the last class before dinner. And, for once, Harry was too excited in class to possibly go to sleep.

Hermione had entered the class and, after holding an excuse note up to the ghostly professor and setting it on his desk, she took her seat.

Several failed attempts to get the bushy-haired girl's attention prompted Harry to use a trick he'd picked up compliments of Tom Riddle. He used his wand to draw a question mark in the air, then pushed it at her. Once it was hovering over her desk, he let it drop in front of her face.

Startled, Hermione looked around, she saw Harry looking at her. So, she shot him an expression that said "WHAT?"

"YOU'RE KIDDING!" Harry's look countered. Followed by "WHAT DO YOU THINK?"

Hermione looked over at the professor, then back at Harry. "After class" she mouthed and turned back to her studying.

Thus, Harry was left watching the clock, impatiently tapping his wand sometimes on his head, sometimes on his leg. He watched the clock as the second hand seemed to stop moving. His leg vibrated with nervous energy. And, even though he swore that clock moved backwards, class was finally dismissed. He waited at his desk until the crowd cleared, then asked "So? What's going on?"

"Do you remember when we made Ginny prove she had nothing to do with you and Susan getting attacked in Hogsmeade?" she asked.

Harry nodded "Yeah, so? That was months ago."

"How about when Ron asked her why she was acting so nasty." Hermione prompted him.

Harry shrugged "Kinda."



"You cut Ginny off before she could answer." Hermione said "And, as a side effect, broke the influence of the Veratiserum."

Now that she'd reminded him, the memory came flooding back "I didn't want her to answer because Sue was there and we were just getting to know each other." Harry remembered. "Ginny didn't even look at Ron for weeks, even in DL."

"Well, practically ever since, Fred George and Ron have been trying to get me to brew more. So they could get that answer." She explained "They didn't do it much after Ron and I split up, but since Ginny has been acting more irrational lately."

He interrupted her "Ginny's been bonkers for a long time."

"Are you going to let me finish, Harry?" she asked, irritably "Anyway, we kidnapped her early this morning and forced her to take another dose. WHAT! DON'T LOOK AT ME LIKE THAT!!"

Harry laughed lightly and said "Calm down Hermione."

"There is no point in sugarcoating it." She said "What we did was illegal. I could go to Azkaban!"

Laying a comforting hand on her shoulder, he replied "I don't think so. Ginny wasn't hexing you, she was after Finnegan. Why's that?"

"Just because we were right, doesn't excuse our actions." She grumbled "The ends can not justify the means!"

Harry did understand why Hermione was upset. Using Veratiserum without Ministry approval was a crime. But, not a severe one. "They don't send you to Azkaban for that, Hermione." He said softly "At worst, maybe a fine, even if it's a big one I'll help you out."

"That's sweet, Harry." She replied with a half smile.

He giggled mischievously "Actually, its money well spent. Sirius said I should enjoy what my parents left me. And seeing Finnegan slammed into a stone column was a real hoot!"

"It's much more serious than that, Harry." She said "You see...the Veratiserum...it broke through at least one Obliviation spell, there are probably more. You see, Ginny figured it out months ago. Seamus has been slipping her a love potion of some kind for a long time. Right before Christmas, they had this huge fight where he Obliviated her memory of accusing him of doing it. That's why ...as soon as the Veratiserum wore off ... she went on that rampage."

Harry's jaw fell open and when he found his voice, all he could say was "Bloody hell!!"

"That was Ron's reaction." She commented "I agree."

Harry teased "Who are you and what have you done with Hermione Granger?"

"Cut it Harry!" she snapped at him.

It only increased his amusement. "Oh come on!" he said "What was it you said First Year? Oh yeah! You told us you were going to bed before we figure out another way of getting killed, or worse, expelled!"

"I did say that, didn't I?" she replied, slightly amused.

Harry laughed at the admission. "Yup!"

"Enough about me." she replied "Harry, don't you see what this means? Everything that's happened...we abandoned her." Hermione wiped at her face as tears formed.

Harry comforted her, but didn't accept her conclusion "Ginny said a lot of nasty things to all of us." He reminded her. "I don't know if I'll ever forgive her for what she said about my parents."

"You've been friendly with Malfoy lately." She pointed out.

Harry screwed up his face in a look of disgust and mumbled “Don’t remind me. And friend is way too strong. And what she said was lower than anything Malfoy said.”

“I’m not going to try to force you to change your mind, Harry. Just think about it.” Said Hermione.

Harry made a disgruntled noise and said “Let’s go to dinner.”

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“You appear to have a lot on your mind.” said Susan as the crowd around the Weasley brothers broke up.

They learned that Madam Pomfrey was currently examining Ginny in an effort to determine which potions, and she was sure there was more than one, had been used on their sister. Seamus Finnegan was suspended from school and Professor McGonagall had confiscated his wand. He was now in one of the school’s guest quarters, which was locked both physically and magically from the outside. One of the crowd had joked that it was to protect him from the Weasley brothers.

Harry had allowed the conversation to wash over him, barely paying attention, until his girlfriend spoke to him. He replied simply “Yeah.”

“Could it possibly have something to do with she-who-must-not-be-named?” asked Susan “In small letters, that is.”

Harry couldn’t help laughing. It was a combination of amusement at the reference to Ginny and relief at the rather light way his girlfriend was addressing the subject of his ex-girlfriend. “Hold that thought!” he declared “George, Ron, Fred we’ll see ya later! C’mon Sue.”

“Soooo...” Susan prompted after a few minutes of aimless, silent, wandering through hallways.

Harry stopped and leaned against a wall. “You know I love you, right.” He said.

“And you know when you say that...with that intense look in your eyes...it turns me to goop.” She leaned her body against his and kissed him.

They stood there, just kissing for a while. Her arms up around his neck, while his rested on her hips. Harry had a happy grin on his face when they broke. “And I was trying to be serious.” He complained without rancor.

“Right, I can be serious, too.” Susan replied. She dropped her own smile and assumed a business-like stance.

Harry shook his head in amusement before saying “Here’s the thing, I’m confused. And, please don’t interrupt me. On one hand, I’m sorry for what happened to Ginny. But, on the other, there’s everything she said --- About, you and me --- There’s that Daily Prophet letter. I almost blasted her into a wall for that...God I wanted to. I really hated her, and Finnegan, for that whole walking in on the snogging session. But I guess I was wrong, at least with her, since Finnegan was controlling her. That means that we never shoulda broke up. Or, maybe we would, I dunno. Either way, I can’t change what’s happened. And I can’t...won’t...change my feelings.”

“That’s...well...for someone who’s confused...you sure talked a lot.” She quipped.

Harry gave her an impatient look.

“Right, sorry.” Susan apologized, then “Look...to be honest...I agree with everything you just said.”

Harry snorted “That doesn’t help much, Sue.”

“S’pose not.” She replied with a shrug. “I love you, too, though.”

Harry pulled her into his arms and squeezed her tight “Now that helps.” He said, gruffly.

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A week passed. Aurors came for Seamus and arrested him. The Daily Prophet reported that he was out on bail, but barred from Hogwarts while awaiting trial. Gryffindor House was deeply divided over the whole affair. Professor McGonagall had to patrol the corridors between the various dormitories in an effort to maintain order. Her normally strict disposition became tyrannical. Ron lost his Prefect position for punching Dean Thomas when the black boy said Seamus was entitled to a trial. And two girls in Ginny's year had literally snatched each other almost bald. Madam Pomfrey healed their injuries, but Professor McGongall refused to allow them to take potions to regrow their hair.

Ginny herself, was in serious condition, but healing. She had been poisoned by the combination of potions and they were heavily addictive. The Medi-witch had to continue feeding Ginny those potions, in steadily reducing doses. Which did further damage, but less than taking her off them all at once. Mrs. Weasley had all but moved into the Hospital Ward during her recovery.

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"Kinda weird that." Ben Cadwallader, Hufflepuff's Seeker, commented while he was reading the Daily Prophet. "Finnegan's trial started the same day Weasley was released from the Hospital."

Susan overheard the remark and shook her head "Actually, it's the law." she said "Section Three, paragraph two. An accused Witch or Wizard has the right to confront their accuser as quickly as possible. The trial had to start as soon as Madam Pomfrey released her."

"This wasn't very bright." said Hannah Abbott, looking at her own copy "Defense Solicitor, Norman Poplewick objected to the Excessive delay in the start of the trial."

Peering over the blond girl's shoulder, Harry remarked "Oh yeah! Look at your aunt's face, Sue. She looks pissed."

"She hasn't had much chance to use her gavel lately." Susan quipped, causing a minor ripple of giggles.

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Daphne's father, who had handled the prosecution for Sirius' case, handled this one. His witnesses consisted of only Ginny, her brothers who testified to her personality changes and the school's Medi-witch. "What, Madam Pomfrey, were the two potions found in Miss Weasley's body?"

"The first was Amortentia, the most powerful of the so-called Love Potions." The Medi-witch answered "A second, Queredulax."

Mr. Greengrass nodded "I think we're all familiar with Amortentia," he said "But not the other potion you mentioned. Could you explain it? In laymen's terms, please."

"Queredulax, in very low doses, is used to get reluctant patients to obey their care-givers." She replied "In higher doses, it is used in terminally ill patients to minimize their suffering."

"How?"

Madam Pomfrey replied "Queredulax makes a patient believe most anything they are told. A Healer will tell the person that there is no pain."

"You indicated that Querdulax is only used on terminal patients." The prosecutor said "Please, explain why."

The Medi-witch gathered her thoughts before answering, then "You see, Mr. Greengrass, the potion is both very addictive and very poisonous."

"What about Amortentia?" he asked.

Madam Pomfrey replied "On a short-term basis, harmless as a shot of Firewhiskey. But, long-term effects could be dangerous. The mixing of the two, I am only beginning to understand."

"Can you give us some idea?" Mr. Greengrass asked.

“While treatment prevented an immediate death by poisoning, Ginny will not experience what we consider a normal lifespan.” Answered Madam Pomfrey “Further, it will only be with careful treatment that Ginny will ever have children. At this point I cannot say that she will be able to.”

Mr. Greengrass nodded and concluded “Thank you, Madam Pomfrey, no more questions.”

“Are you in the habit of poisoning patients?” Seamus’ attorney demanded before he even stood.

Madam Pomfrey reacted as if slapped “How dare you!”

“Your own records confirm that you gave these Potions to Miss Weasley.” He countered. “Come, come Madam Pomfrey, how many other students have suffered under your incompetence? Or has it been deliberate?”

Furious, the Medi-witch countered “Your client was the one administering these potions!! Or did you ignore Miss Weasley’s own testimony!!”

“Your Honor, I move to strike as non-responsive.” Mr. Popplewick said “Please direct the witness to answer my question.”

The prosecutor also stood and said “Your Honor, I object to both questions the defense just asked. They were uncalled for.”

“Both objections are sustained.” Madam Bones decided “And, Mr. Popplewick, I would be careful with your accusations. Do I make myself clear?”

The Finnegan attorney half bowed and said “Of course, Your Honor, my apologies to the court.”

“What about your apology to me?” Madam Pomfrey snapped.

He ignored her and said “No more questions.”

"The prosecution rests." Mr. Greengrass stated.

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"Bloody hell!" Harry exclaimed when the transcript of the trial's testimony appeared in the paper the next day. "Hope that git never gets hurt at Hogwarts." The entire school had Potions off that day because Susan's mother had been called as an expert witness.

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There was a solid day of testimony from friends of the Finnegan's, both Magical and Muggle, concerning Seamus' character. Students from Gryffindor and Ravenclaw testified on his behalf. Mr. Popplewick couldn't find anyone willing in Hufflepuff. Mrs. Finnegan never allowed her family to associate with Slytherins, so that had been out.

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"Please state your name and position for the record." Mr. Popplewick asked of the witness.

She replied "Joan Bones...Potion Mistress, Hogwarts."

"Professor, you have had a couple of months to observe my client. What level of student is Seamus?" he asked.

"Average" she replied "he scores well on some exams, not so well on others. In my opinion, Mr. Finnegan could do better if he applied himself."

The defense solicitor nodded "Could my client have brewed either of the Potions---?"

"Objection!" Mr. Greengrass called as he stood "Your Honor, that calls for speculation."

Mr. Popplewick countered "I disagree, Mrs. Bones can testify to the level of expertise needed and my client's own skill."



“Overruled.” Amelia decided “The witness may answer.”

Joan nodded and replied “Amortentia is fairly complex, and not usually taught until NEWTs, but not beyond a Fifth Year’s level.”

“And Queredulax?” asked Mr. Popplewick.

Joan was silent for a moment, then said “Queredulax is one of the Potions that the Mastery Board uses to certify a Master. The ingredients are difficult to obtain, and hazardous to work with.”

“Could Seamus have brewed Queredulax?” he asked.

Joan shook her head “No. Not a chance.”

“No further questions.”

Amelia addressed the prosecutor “Mr. Greengrass?”

“Thank you, Your Honor.” He said “And, just for clarity, Professor, it is possible that the accused could have brewed the Amortentia Potion?”

Joan nodded “As I said, it is somewhat advanced for a Fifth Year. But, not impossible.”

“Have you ever brewed them yourself?” asked Mr. Greengrass.

Joan answered “Yes, to both.”

“And what have you done with the potions you have brewed?” he probed.

“Sold them” Joan answered “to Hogwarts, the Ministry, or St. Mungo’s.”

The prosecutor followed up with “This is normal for Potion Masters?”

“Absolutely.”

“So there is no reason, necessarily, for the accused to have brewed either potion himself.” Mr. Greengrass pointed out.

Mr. Popplewick protested “Leading the witness.”

Amelia agreed “Sustained. Are you asking a question, prosecutor?”

“Apologies, Your Honor” Mr. Greengrass said with a half bow to the defense attorney. “Professor Bones, if a person obtains a potion from someone else, regardless of the source, what would they need to do?”

Joan just shrugged “Very simple, really. Just remove the preservation charms and heat for five to fifteen minutes, depending on the Potion. Then it is active again.”

“And instructions are on the container, I assume?” The prosecutor added.

Joan answered “Yes.”

“No more questions.” Mr. Greengrass concluded.

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After Joan’s testimony, both sides rested and court was adjourned for the day. It took the better part of the next day to reach a verdict, which Harry learned about by way of the evening Quibbler, delivered by his trusty owl. “Thanks, Hedwig.” He said casually as he unrolled the paper. He fed the snowy bird some of the ham on his dinner plate.

“Anything about the trial, Harry?” asked Hermione.

Splitting his attention between feeding Hedwig and the Quibbler he replied “Ahh...gimme a sec...ehh! Back page...YESSS!!!” he slapped the table.

Hedwig squawked angrily and flew off.

“Sorry girl!” he yelled up. Then, turning back to the paper, now splattered with pumpkin juice, he held it up and yelled “GUILTY!! G --- U --- I --- L --- T --- Y!! GUILTY!! GUILTY!! GUILTY!!” And, from his perspective, another bright spot was that there was no one to come down on him for the outburst. No High Inquisitor and no Headmaster, both were attending the trial.

Other students react to the news in their own way. Of all the Houses, Gryffindor was the most bitterly divided. From Seamus being taken away, through the trial the long table in the Great Hall had been reshuffled so that Ginny supporters sat at one end and Seamus supporters were at the other. And Harry’s announcement touched off the simmering House. It started with the two leaders. Dean Thomas tossed his cup of pumpkin juice in Lee Jordan’s face. Then, the older boy banished a tray full of breaded chicken legs hitting Dean and several other students. From there, it only took moments for food --- and fists --- to start flying all along the Table. Ravenclaw, the House next to Gryffindor, rushed out of their seats to get out of the way.

It took Hermione, the only Gryffindor not involved, plus every Prefect from every other House, and every teacher almost twenty minutes to restore order. Finally Professor McGonagall simply had them stunning the brawlers. The wandless Hagrid contributed nearly as much as all the others combined. The bearded giant waded into the students. And with a fine disregard for age, or sex, grabbed two students and thumped their heads together...And two...And two...

“You’re not thinking of joining that mess, are you?” asked Susan as the battle began. And, to emphasize her point, she clamped a hand on Harry’s thigh.

Harry covered her hand with his and said “No-ooo th--anks! I’d rather be snogging!”

“Think anyone would notice?” she grinned back at him.

Before he could reply something caught his eye. He whipped out his wand and yelled “PROTEGO!” A plate of spaghetti splattered against his shield.

"Mmm...got some on your cheek." Susan observed, then proceeded to lick the spot off.

Harry's eyes narrowed in concentration and his shield expanded until it was large enough to cover them both. He flicked his head in the direction of the door and eagerly replied "We're outta here!"

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"Wha'd'you want, Malfoy?" asked Ron at the approach of the blond Slytherin. Up til that moment, the fair sized group had been enjoying a pleasant unseasonably warm day sitting outside on the lawn outside the castle.

Draco sneered at the redhead "Careful with that wand, Weasley. Don't want to go breaking it. Well...Abbott... your tastes have improved. At least slightly...very slightly."

"I warned off one of your goons months ago, Malfoy." Hannah replied with a nasty look.

Draco shrugged carelessly and laughed "Oh, yes, poor Crabbe. Section Nine scared him to death. Doesn't even look at witches anymore."

"Then you would be ---"

Draco cut her off "Oh don't whine. I just wanted to focus your admittedly clever mind, even if you aren't in Slytherin. There's an interesting little paragraph toward the end of the section. I wonder if the Wizengamot has considered it in sentencing."

"Stop playing your games, Malfoy!" Ron growled "This concerns my sister!"

Draco sighed "Honestly, you can't expect me to give you all the answers. Work it out for yourselves." Then he turned to walk away.

"Wait...Draco." Said Harry "...Why?"

He turned back and replied "Three reasons, Potter. First, I don't mind having you and Weasel owe me one---"

"HEY!" exclaimed Ron, indignantly.

Draco laughed "And --- no matter her faults --- Ginny is still a Pureblood. Finnegan isn't."

"If you use that word---" growled Ron.

Harry waved him to silence, curious about Draco's motivation "You said three reasons."

"Did I?" asked Draco. And, this time, he did depart.

"Bloody git!" Ron exclaimed

Harry ignored the outburst and commented "You know...when I got into the Wizard Government class...I did a report on the Section Nine Laws...but it's been a while. Hannah?"

"I'm not a walking encyclopedia." Hannah groused

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For Hermione Granger, there was no such thing as a lazy Sunday. It was a rare thing to see her OUT of the library regardless of the day. She, however, was surprised by the arrival of Harry, Susan, Ron and Hannah. Rather amused, she greeted them "Are you lost?"

"I still don't believe we're listening to Malfoy." Ron growled.

Susan gave him a half-hearted push and, taking charge, said "Right, Harry, let's see that report of yours. Ron, can you go grab the book with the Section Nine laws in it?"

"Uhh...sure." Ron replied. His response had a slightly nervous undertone to it. Most Pureblood boys were skittish when it came to Section Nine. And, by the time the dinner bell rang, with their scheme

completed he summed it up with five words “Almost feel sorry for Finnegan.”

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Stern and cold, Amelia Bones glared down from her Judge/Speaker seat. Her voice was flat and emotionless as she addressed the now convict “The defendant will rise.” She ordered

Both Seamus and Mr. Pottlewick stood. Right behind them, Mr. and Mrs. Finnegan a Muggle and a Witch, leaned forward and clutched each other’s hands and their son’s shoulders. The couple had mournful, nervous expressions on their faces. On the other side of the courtroom, Ginny sat beside Mr. Greengrass with her gaze fixed on the Great Seal of Wizarding Britain above the Wizengamot’s heads. She hadn’t looked at Seamus once during the trial. That included while testifying, regardless of where Mr. Popplewick stood while cross-examining her. The Weasley brothers had no problem looking at him, though they were looks of pure hate.

“Seamus Finnegan” Madam Bones continued “I would like to note, for the record, had you not been a minor you would have been facing time in Azkaban. Having been found guilty of mental tampering through use of potions and Involuntary Obliviation you are sentenced to Ministry incarceration until your seventeenth birthday. You are additionally expelled from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Your wand, currently in Ministry custody, will be destroyed--”

Mrs. Finnegan interrupted the speech with a piteous wail.

That was also the moment Harry, smartly dressed, entered “Your Honor, may I speak?”

“The trial is concluded, Mr. Potter.” Madam Bones replied “As, very nearly, is the sentencing phase.”

Harry nodded “I understand that” he said “And I have no objection to whatever sentence the Wizangamot imposes. However---”

"I do not see where Mr. Potter has any say over the Wizengamot." said Mr. Greengrass.

Harry had mixed feelings for this particular man, as he'd acted as prosecutor in Sirius' trial. But he was also the father of one of the members of his Defense League, even if he didn't know about that. "I apologize Mr. Greengrass." He said "But, I am invoking Section Nine, sub-section twenty-four. I am demanding compensation for my family from Seamus Finnegan."

"And is Susan aware of this?" asked Madam Bones, dropping out of her role. She was stunned, and worried. And worse, truth be told, not completely familiar with the particular sub-section involved. The high number indicated an ancient, probably LONG unused, law. Newly added sub-sections of the Wizarding Charter pushed older ones down the list as they were enacted.

Harry grinned mischievously and replied "Yes, ma'am, Susan, Hermione and Hannah helped me put my presentation together."

"Proceed, then." She decided, not entirely willingly. She was worried that the admittedly intelligent group might not have the experience to avoid the many pitfalls that early Wizarding Law contained.

### 33 – Susan's Birthday

"I most strenuously object, Your Honor, this is a modern court!" Mr. Popplewick exclaimed "Obsolete laws have no place here!"

The prosecutor argued "Any law still a part of our Charter is, by definition, not obsolete. Unless you mean old automatically means obsolete. In which case, you are insulting many of our most distinguished Members."

"I meant no such thing." The defense attorney said, coldly.

Madam Bones cut in "Shame on both of you. Enough of this crosstalk! I have already decided the court will hear what Mr. Potter has to say!"

"Under Sub-section twenty-four" Harry started, speaking crisply and clearly "which became law in the year 814, my relationship with Ginny Weasley reached the point of an implied betrothal. Finnegan's use of Potions and Spells destroyed that relationship." He pointedly ignored the shocked looks directed at him from the Weasleys. Though, he could imagine the smug look on Ron's face.

Madam Bones, her expression hardening, addressed him coldly "And what, Mr. Potter, impact does this have on your current relationship?"

"With respect, Your Honor, one has nothing to do with the other." He replied, the strength of his voice contained a confidence he didn't quite feel.

Decidedly displeased, she asked "Precisely what crime has Mr. Finnegan committed against your family?"

"The purpose of Sub-section twenty-four was to ensure the continuation of Pureblood family lines." replied Harry, he spoke despite a creeping blush.

The Headmaster stood at that point "Forgive me, Amelia," he said, there was an undertone of worry in his voice "Harry I order you to return to Hogwarts."



"This is between me and Finnegan, Professor." Harry retorted "Your Honor, under Section Nine Sub-section twenty-four, I have the right to challenge Finnegan to a duel."

Madam Bones was shocked, she stammered "I ...err...that is...no s--  
\_"

"I absolutely forbid it!" both Dumbledore and Mrs. Finnegan said, in virtually the same breath.

Seamus launched himself in an attempt to attack Harry, who had never moved. Three Aurors cast body bind spells on him and stuck him to his seat.

"Paragraph 3-b permits the Chief Warlock to 'proscribe a duel' Harry acknowledged. It had been a point Hannah had foreseen.

Dumbledore looked satisfied. Maybe he could get Harry back in line after all. He was wrong.

"In that event, Sub-Paragraph Two demands 'surrender of the offender's procreation ability' Harry quoted. This time, he did look at the Weasleys.

Charlie had been unable to leave Romania due to a newly hatched dragon. But, Bill was there. He refused to look at Harry. The same was true of Mr. Weasley. Ron was huddled with the Twins who were struggling with laughter. Mr. Weasley raised his eyebrows in delighted surprise and nodded at Harry. Ginny, still sickly, smiled faintly.

"ANIMALS!!" Mr. Finnegan yelled.

The prosecutor looked at him with loathing "Silence Muggle."

"Careful, Mr. Greengrass." Madam Bones warned "There is no bigotry in this courtroom. And, Mr. Poplewick, I would advise you to caution your clients of the reverse. We do have a number contraceptive options av---"

Harry interrupted "Excuse me, Your Honor, but the law says removal ---- with a sword."

"NOOOO!!!!" Seamus screamed, he fought with the body bind spells to no avail.

Mad-Eye Moody, at the back of the courtroom, laughed silently to himself.

"That's---"

Harry finished the thought "Barbaric, Your Honor, is what Hermione called it. But, considering his actions, deserved."

"I'd never hurt Ginny!" Seamus cried "I love her!! And she loves me!!"

Face twisted in hate, Mrs. Weasley screeched "YOU FOUL! LOATHSOME! EVIL!! WRETCH!!" George and Ron had to restrain her.

"Order!" Madam Bones demanded, sharply. She looked around at the various members of the Wizengamot, almost all of whom were nodding. Especially Gideon Prewett, Ginny's Great-grandfather. "So ordered, then." She declared "However, our society has progressed in the last thousand years. Healers will perform the operation with the prisoner unconscious. This session is closed. Harry, a word."

Harry swallowed, somewhat nervously, and approached.

"Harry, I would speak with you." Dumbledore said in a cold tone.

Madam Bones stepped between them and asked "Is this a school related matter?"

"I do not see that every conversation between myself and Harry need involve you, Amelia." The Headmaster said. "However, in this case, perhaps we are in agreement. Harry demanding a duel with Mr. Finnegan is most out of character for you. I am concerned that---"

Harry rolled his eyes impatiently “---you are behaving as Tom Riddle did.” He finished the statement “Actually, I hoped you would forbid it. That was the punishment I was going for.”

“That was highly manipulative, Harry.” Dumbledore scolded him “And by no means---”

Again, Harry cut him off, “You don’t have any right to tell me right from wrong!” he complained “Letting Snape rob me blind for years!”

“Harry, it is such unfounded accusations that led to excessive hostility between your father and Professor Snape in the first place.” The Headmaster said “And, while it is rather early, we do need to discuss your safety for the summer. I am certain I can come to a reasonable accommodation with your aunt. This form from Gringotts will allow me access to your vault to---”

Harry turned beet red and his face twisted in rage “FUCK YOU!!” he roared “DID YOU EVEN PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT HAPPENED?!?!!!”

“If you don’t leave now, I’ll have Aurors remove you!” Amelia finally intervened. After gauging her mood, the Headmaster departed.

“And good riddance!” Harry snarled at his departing back. This confrontation basically put an end to the last of Harry’s already flagging trust. “He wants to give the Dursleys money he can do it out of his own vault! We need to tell the Goblins not to give him any money! Madam Bones...I’m sorry I lost my temper...And you wanted to talk to me.”

She shook her head “Think nothing of it Harry. I just regret being unable to force a case against him for turning control of your finances over to Snape. At any rate...indulge my curiosity... laws that old are rarely invoked and can have unexpected traps.”

“An implied betrothal is not an actual one.” explained Harry “And, no betrothal can exist between minors without parental consent. Ron thought Finnegan was getting off too easy.”

Amelia nodded "I don't disagree, Harry. But, it was a rather risky strategy. Were you so sure of the Headmaster's intervention?"

"It's consistent with his pattern of behavior." replied Harry.

Amelia was amused by the turn of phrase "I find myself in agreement with your analysis." She said in the same tone.

"Huh?" asked Harry. Then he laughed.

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Seamus Finnegan – Four days after sentencing

"Ugh! I don't feel so good!" he complained. He made out of bed and, to his cell's toilet, just in the nick of time ---BRRRRYYYKKKK --- After washing the foul taste from his mouth he reached down to relieve himself. His eyes popped out in horror as he felt --- nothing.

He stood in front of the mirror in his cell and tore his pants off. His testicles and penis were gone --- GONE --- Not even a scar marked the site of the missing organs. "I LOOK LIKE A FUCKING GI JOE!!" Seamus yelled appalled at his new situation "I HAAAAATTTTEEEE YOUUUU HARRRRRY POTTTERRRRR!!!"

"Silence! Prisoner 6702495!" a female voice peremptorily ordered "I'm sure Miss Weasley will enjoy seeing that moment. Over and over --- and ---- Over!" The guard outside the cell had a thatch of messy pink hair.

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Mum, Dad and Ginny

"All I am saying is you should rest more." said Mum.

Ginny stubbornly slapped another set of robes into her trunk "I'm tired of being sick!" she snapped "And I'm tired of being tired!!"

"Still, I think---"

Ginny shook her head "No! Mum! Not another day! I'm bored and I want my life back!!"

"I think we should let her go, Molly." Dad said.

Ginny hugged her father around his waist and sobbed "Thank you, Daddy."

"Arthur, I thought we agreed---"

Dad cut her off, softly but firmly "We agreed to do what is best for our daughter. And that includes considering her wishes."

"Very well." Mum said, ungraciously. Turning a kind smile to Ginny, she added "Of course, dear, I imagine you miss your friends. I'll take you in the morning."

Ginny grinned happily and hugged her "Thanks Mum!" she exclaimed

"We'll leave you to finish packing, dear." Molly said as she returned the hug "Arthur, let's go. We have a great deal to discuss."

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Susan and Harry

"Tell me! (poke) What you got me (poke) For my birthday!" (poke poke poke) the red-haired witch demanded.

The green-eyed wizard half-heartedly defended himself and giggled each time "Is it your birthday?" he asked, feigning a surprised face. "Was that today?"

"Don't tell us you forgot..." Hufflepuff's Seeker said. It was the first time in months that the Third Year boy had said anything negative against Harry. "Everyone in the House knows it's tomorrow!"

Harry was busy laughing and wrestling with Susan. "Ok! Ok! I'll tell you!!" he said through giggles. And when she relented he trapped her

hands in his, kissed her deeply, then ran for the boys' stairs while she was momentarily dazed "Tomorrow, that is! Nite, Sue!!"

"Stop teasing me Harry Potter!" Susan yelled up. All she got in reply was laughter.

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Ginny, Ron and Hermione

After watching their mother leave, Ron gave his sister a guilty look and said "Merlin, Gin, I'm so sorry. We ... I....well, I don't know about Fred and George... shoulda seen Finnegan was..."

"That's just it, Ron." She cut him off "You did...I didn't --- couldn't --- listen... I'm sorry, for so much."

In the middle of Gryffindor's Common Room, uncaring of who was there, Ron cried into her shoulder.

"What about you and Mum?" asked Ginny, returning the hug.

Ron frowned down at her and replied "I'm a little tired of trying. It's her turn."

"But, Harry---"

Now, Ron pushed her away "Don't Ginny."

"I don't mean it that way, Ron." she said "My feelings are all mixed up. Part of me wants to be with him again. Part of me still hates him, and ---I dunno. But, then there's all that happened with the family. Then he got into that fight with Charlie and Bill."

Hermione had came in just then "Ginny, you can not blame any of that on Harry." She said, defensively. "And I think that you're forgetting everything that Harry has done for your family. And you specifically."

"I don't wanna fight with you, Hermione." She replied "I don't understand anything anymore. I just want my life back the way it was before. I wanna be me again...uhh...whoever that is."

The older girl softened "And I ...for one... would be glad to help. I mean that." She said "But, there are some rules. Harry is my best friend, despite all the pain he went through, he never really said anything hateful about you."

"But it wasn't my fault." Ginny almost whined.

Hermione shook her head "I have thought about what's happened over the last year." She said "I don't blame you for what Seamus did. I do think one of the things that made it hard for us to tell you were being controlled was that, from the start, you were jealous about everything that had to do with Harry."

"And I was right!" snapped Ginny "Bones---"

Flicking her thumb across her throat "Ginny!" she said sharply "That is my other rule! I can be your friend, again! But I am a ---Sue's my friend, too. And she is a good person."

"oh" replied Ginny quietly.

"And, ya gotta admit, finding those ancient laws to de-ball Finnegan was brilliant!" Ron exclaimed.

Ginny laughed, enjoying the feel of closeness with him again. "I never really thought Harry had it in him."

"Harry's changed a lot." said Ron, he was suddenly cold toward his sister again. "And, you know, Sue had a big influence on him. She's great for him. Didn't you ever read her reply to you in The Prophet?" Then, he got up to walk away.

Hermione sighed "And, Ron's changed a lot too. And --- mostly --- lately --- it's been Hannah Abbott that he's been looking to. Oh well ...at least we're still friends. Gin, it's just the way things are."

"Yeah...I know" Ginny sighed "Hermione...would you ahh... tell me... about them?"

The older girl considered, absently picking at several of her nails with her wand "I guess it wouldn't do any harm. But, I will keep their secrets. Though I could give you a fair idea....."

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Hannah and Susan

In the Fifth Year girls' dorm on the morning of April 29th the blond Hufflepuff had the unique honor of keeping her best friend away from Harry's preparations until lunch time at Hogsmeade. And busy enough not to think of her boyfriend. "Oh brother..." she complained when she saw the redhead's eyes flutter "And I can only get away with one dose of soma. Morning, Sue!"

"Hannah! I told you to wake me up an hour ago!" she complained.

Hannah grinned at her and replied "Happy Birthday! You gotta open my gift."

"You know Harry's been torturing me for days." grumbled Susan "I---"

Hannah twisted her face in annoyance and said "HAAAPPYYYYY BIRRRRRTHDAYYY! To my best friend. The girl I had my first sleepover with. The girl who----"

"Sorry Hannah." Susan said guiltily "Thank you very much. I would love to see your present." She sat up in bed and assumed a pose of perfect patience.

Hannah went back to her bed, smirking the whole way. She threw herself across her own bed "I know it's here somewhere." She said as she busied herself with looking around. She kept up the act just long enough.

"Nice, Hannah, real nice." Susan said "But did'ja have to hide it so well?"



Hannah just shrugged “You should take a shower.” She said “Then get into your dress robes.”

??? Susan’s expression said.

Hannah grabbed her friend by the arm, shoved soap and shampoo into her hands and hustled her into the shower. “And don’t come out until you’re squeaky clean and smelling purty!”

“Purty?” asked Susan with a combination of bemusement and irritation. Half an hour, and four attempts to escape the shower, later, she was finally proclaimed clean “It’s about bloody time!”

Hannah then spent twenty minutes primping with makeup and fluffing her friend’s hair “Eh...” she commented unenthusiastically “...I guess you’ll do.”

“What!” exclaimed Susan “After all that! That’s all I get! GIT!”

Hannah laughed at the insult “Want me to snog you to prove it?” she asked.

“Maybe so.” Susan said suggestively. “Now...can I see my boyfriend?”

Hannah put on a hurt face and asked “When was the last time we went to Hogsmeade? Just us?”

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Neil and Harry

“You did an incredible job putting this together, Harry.” Susan’s father complemented. They were standing in a decorated section of Madam Rosmerta’s Inn. He picked a small tomato off a serving tray and popped it in.

Harry took on a pleased blush "Thanks Mr. Bones." He said "But, it really wasn't hard. Dobby and Madam Rosmerta did all the work. All I did was pay the bills."

"Missy Bones and Missy Abbott is coming up the street, Harry Potter." The little elf seemed almost to know when his name was spoken. "Missus Boneses sounds angry."

Neil emitted a snort of amusement "Sounds like Hannah really put her through her paces. Anyway, Harry, let me say one thing seriously. Putting yourself in the way of Snape's Cruciatus Curse was unbelievably brave and courageous."

"I couldn't stand to see anything happen to her, Mr. Bones. I just reacted." replied Harry.

Neil shied away from the seriousness of the subject, asking "How did your first Disapparation/Apparation feel?"

"I didn't really realize what I was doing." Harry said "Felt this rush, like I was on a broom, in a dive. Then...of course...I got hit as soon as I Reapparated."

Dobby popped in again saying "Theys here, Harry Potter!!"

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"But I'm not hungry!" Susan complained "And I haven't seen Harry all day!"

Hannah shoved her through the door and everyone yelled "SURPRISE!!!!!!!"

"Daddy!" Susan exclaimed, hugging him "This is great!!"

Neil released his daughter "Don't thank me, sweetie" he said "Thank that boyfriend of yours."

"You had my best friend conspire against me!" she growled.

Harry grinned at her and answered “Yup. And you look gorgeous.”

“Why, thank you, kind sir.” She said, curtsying in front of him. “Sooo...you really did all this?”

Harry, grinning with the praise, nodded and said “Well.I. sure. But, of course, Madam Rosmerta---”

“That’s Rosie to you, Harry.” The innkeeper said “And, naturally, I made sure to include the booth you had your first date in your section for the afternoon.”

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Tina and Sirius

Neil Bones arrived at Madam Rosmerta’s few minutes before Harry. He heard the laughter of both his wife and youngest daughter. What he saw was a transformation in mid-process. He watched a dog leg and paw turn into a human hand and arm. By the time he reached the seats, the dog head was becoming human. “Sirius Bloody Black!” he exclaimed.

“Easy Neil.” His wife cautioned “There’s nothing to worry about.”

Fully human again, the thin ex-convict smiled broadly and held out his hand. “Pleasure to meet you.” He said. Then, with a smirk, added “That is as a human, anyway.”

“He’s Snuffles, Daddy!” the youngest Bones announced. Tina leaned over the table and sloppily kissed her father’s cheek.

Sirius laughed and commented “You thought Snuffles’ kisses were wet.”

“Stop picking on me!” she complained.

The adults all laughed at her protest, though Neil was somewhat nervous “Joanie, can I talk to you?” It wasn’t a request. And, from their position, he didn’t take his eyes off his daughter.

"Your father is right to be uneasy around me." Sirius said to the girl who was eyeing her father with much displeasure.

"But it's not fair!" she protested "And I trust you. So does Harry and that's good enough."

Sirius gave a delighted grin. Few people wanted to associate with a long inhabitant of Azkaban, even though he'd been declared innocent of all charges. Children seemed to see through that layer grime that Sirius felt came from his time in the dark prison. "I appreciate that, Tina." He said, patting her hand "I really do. But, your father is a good man. He's right to be concerned about you. These are dangerous times."

"It's silly." Tina grumbled.

Sirius was saved from further comment by first the arrival of Harry and Ron. And, only a few minutes later, Susan and Hannah. Facing Azkaban, or Voldemort, was no problem. Figuring out what to tell a young girl about evil was beyond his skills.

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Harry and Susan

She got out of her seat and ran a finger through his hair "Dance with me, Harry." She said.

"What?" he asked "There's no dance floor---And in front of your parents!"

Susan laughed and pulled him out of the booth "Don't be an arse." She replied, scornfully "Dance with your girlfriend." Then she wrapped his arms around her waist and started swaying.

"I feel a little silly." Harry whispered in her ear. "There ain't even any music. And everyone's starting to stare."

She tugged on the hair at his neck and scolded him "Give it a rest and just go with it. You'd think you didn't want your arms around me."

"O-oo-oh, i-i-it's n-n-ot th-that a-a-t all." Harry replied nervously.

"Oh...I know that...Harry" she said with a giggle "Merlin...you're easy to tease...You wanna see something embarrassing? Look at Ron with Hannah's parents."

Following her lead, Harry turned until the Abbotts came into view. He couldn't hear anything being said. But, he could tell that Ron was a bumbling mess. Researching those Section Nine Laws had completely changed Ron's attitude toward girls. He treated Hannah like a princess and followed every single one of the formal provisions of a suitor when addressing her parents. They found it amusingly quaint.

"It's a good thing Bob and Joanne don't take it too seriously." Susan laughed "Ron keeps that up and he'll end up married before this party's over. Good thing they're not the Malfoys."

Harry shivered violently "Eww!! Sue! That's gross! Don't wanna even imagine that."

"Cousin Draco'd be pretty hot if he just finished getting his head outta his arse." Susan commented absently. Then she waited for the fallout.

Harry's mouth opened and closed three times before he emitted a sound. "That's beyond foul!" he hissed in her ear. He plucked her off her feet and spun her around.

"Put me down Harry!" she protested. Her feet kicked several inches off the ground. Her protests were light-hearted and playful. She kissed his forehead as she felt his hands tighten on her waist. "Mmm...now that's a birthday kiss."

He grinned against Susan's lips and said "Happy Birthday and I love you."

"I love you too, Harry." She said, happily.

After the young couple's impromptu dance, Madam Rosmerta rolled out a massive cake. There were sixteen candles on it, spread across the face.

"Hey! Harry! Didn't know she was an older woman!" Ron catcalled. The partiers laughed. Hannah slapped the back of his head playfully.

Neil took center stage and squeezed one of his daughter's shoulders "Thanks, everyone for coming." He announced "And a special thanks to Harry for hosting this gathering. Sixteen's a pretty important year in a girl's life. I guess my little girl's all grown up."

"I too want to thank all of you and especially our host for an amazing event." Joan Bones said, adding her voice to her husband's. "Harry's --- well --- I don't know how many people would throw themselves in the path of an Unforgivable. I would like to publicly thank him."

Harry looked down bashfully, giving her a shy smile "Welcome." he muttered as she enfolded him in a hug. Harry didn't think he deserved special praise for that. Having felt the curse, he just didn't want to think of Susan suffering under it.

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Sirius and Harry

"Quite the hero, huh?" the former convict asked of his Godson.

Harry punched his arm and grumbled "Nix it Sirius!" He still didn't like it.

"Easy on your poor, old Godfather." Sirius laughed "I'm brittle enough." And, when Harry was giggling, he grabbed the boy in a headlock.

Harry yelped as knuckles dug into the top of his head "LEMME GO!!!" he yelled. And after a minute of tussling, he pushed his attacker forward into a wall and locked his arm against his back. Triumphant, he yelled "GOTCHA!!!"

“Good move!” said Sirius, playfully. “And ... hehehheh... Not a bad way to impress a girl’s parents.”

Harry let him go and growled at him

“OH. Lighten up, Harry!” Sirius scolded him “Very few men get such a free pass. I don’t like that you got hit by that. Not once, but twice. And it is the definition of a hero...”

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Mum and Susan

“Do they ever grow up?” asked Susan as she watched the play-wrestling.

Joan chuckled at the observation. “I still have some doubts about that man. But your sister is a remarkably good judge of character. And Harry seems genuinely fond of him.”

“He was found innocent by the Wizengamot.” Susan reminded her mother “And, I never seen Harry trust any adult. You’ve seen him in school. He only really likes Professor Sprout. He doesn’t trust Professor McGonagall and I wouldn’t be surprised if he hates Dumbledore. And I don’t blame him.”

Joan looked slightly saddened “I remember a time when you thought the Headmaster could do no wrong.”

“I already had that talk with Auntie Ami.” grumbled Susan “Look, Mum, there’s --- think about it --- if Sirius was working for Voldemort, he had lotsa chances to get Harry over the last year.”

Looking at her daughter in surprise and fear, Joan whispered “You used His name.”

“It’s just a name.” the girl replied, nonchalantly. “Hermione said---”

Joan's face twisted slightly in a grimace, she observed "Quoting Gryffindors?"

"Yes, Mother." Susan countered "Dating one, too. As I was saying Fear of a name only increases fear of the thing itself."

Joan was left to look at Susan as she strolled away toward Harry. And, by an odd coincidence, she spotted her son and his fiancée sitting with a certain Muggleborn witch.

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Frank Paula and Hermione

"Harry is very different from the way he was as a little kid." Paula Polkiss observed. This particular trio had first been watching Harry and Susan together, then the play-wrestling between Harry and Sirius.

Hermione didn't especially care for this woman. She viewed the Muggle as an indirect source of the abuse Harry had suffered at the hands of the Dursleys. However, she did find Susan's brother an interesting character. "Yes, most of us have always been amazed at how what a nice person Harry is." She said tartly "I believe he mentioned your brother more than once."

"I don't think we should discuss ancient history." Frank Bones said "Because we're all here for my sister's birthday. Right?"

Paula wrapped her arm around the red-haired man's massive bicep and nodded "Course luv." She said "Hermione, you've known Harry since he started Hogwarts, right?"

"He and Ron were friends right from the first day." The young witch replied "Then, I joined in a few weeks later." That wasn't half the story, but she wasn't inclined to offer too many details. "Frank, I'm curious, how was it? To grow up in a Magical family?"

Frank offered an enigmatic grin, asking "You mean, did I feel like a cripple?"



“Ahh...buuu...urrr” Hermione stuttered and stammered, uncomfortably “Tha’snot the way...”

Having had his fun, Frank said “It’s alright, I know what you mean. And, actually, some Pureblood families would disown a Squib.”

“And it would’ve been their loss.” Said Paula, lovingly.

Frank blushed slightly and pecked his fiancée on the cheek. “And I love you, too.” He added.

“The other thing I wonder about is, with the Secrecy Statutes, how did you find out about our world, Paula?” asked Hermione.

“I told her.” Frank answered “There are exceptions. Just like your parents. In my case, though, I did also get written approval from a certain highly placed Ministry of Magic official.”

Paula gave an amused laugh and observed “Yeah, Aunt Ami is a real softie. And traveling around by fireplace is fascinating.”

“We do have one big problem with our wedding plans.” Frank said “I couldn’t imagine not inviting Harry.”

Paula finished the thought “And, because they work for the same company and we live on the same street, the Dursleys are on my parents’ invite list.”

“That is a problem.” Hermione said, very seriously. “I don’t see an easy solution for that.”

Sourly, Susan’s brother suggested “Let’s elope.”

“You don’t want that, Frank.” Paula said “And neither do I.”

In spite of herself, Hermione ended up liking the Muggle woman. While she thought she watched, with amusement, as Harry and Susan gently teased and kissed together.

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Harry and Susan

"Thanks for the party, Harry." said Susan. They had returned to Hogwarts and the Hufflepuff Common Room and the redhead had just returned from 'tucking in' as she called it, Hannah. She pointed her wand at the plush single chair Harry was sitting in, pushed it toward a corner and faced it to the wall. "And, thank you for the lovely necklace."

He grabbed her hand and pulled her into his lap "Glad you enjoyed yourself." He said. "Everyone said I should take it easy after Christmas."

"Well it was very sweet." She replied. Then she wriggled her hips suggestively and added "Wanna see it?"

Harry gave an odd look and replied "But, I bought it."

"While it's around my neck --- goof!" she said "Y'know--- the chain is pretty long --- hangs down kinda far --- about here." Susan had taken hold of one of his hands, kissed his knuckles and then dragged it down her neck.

Harry grinned into her eyes "Ahh...I see... I'd love to see it." He replied, resting his hand on her breast.

"Mmm...too slow..." she teased "Thought you were intelligent."

Harry made a mock angry look. Growled "Witch!" and dug his fingers right into her liver. Naturally, it wasn't the hand that was squeezing her breast.

"HARRRIEEEEEE!!!" squealed Susan. She writhed and squirmed. Only her own privacy wards had kept her protests from rousing half the House. She finally captured the attacking hand and with a lust filled look of her own trapped it under her rear.

Harry minded not at all. His eyes matched the look in hers before he passionately kissed her. Their tongues twirled around each other.

With long practice, he popped the clasp between the two cups, tweaked a nipple and lifted the breast. Then his lips left hers and encircled and nibbled on the button of flesh, eliciting a moan of pleasure from Susan.

“Y.y..yy. in trrrubbbllleee Potttterr!!” she groaned. Then she slid her mouth along his neck, seeking the spot where she had already raised several small bruises. It was a lusty payback to his sucking on her breast. Plus, her hands roamed the length of his torso. Harry was just as responsive to her as she was to him.

Until the pair fell asleep there, they snogged away. Sometimes hectically, almost roughly other times lightly and tenderly.

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Ron Hannah and Ginny

Susan had wisely planned ahead with her best friend. Hannah Abbott awoke at 6:05AM and found her best friend laying in a tangle of arms and legs. She could immediately see that both were entirely bare from the waist up. One of Susan’s socks was on the floor. The blond Hufflepuff transfigured the discarded footwear into a large quilt and covered them. Then she slapped on several privacy and repelling charms.

“Where’s Harry?” asked Ron, when Hannah appeared in the Great Hall.

Hannah sat next to him at the Gryffindor table and kissed his cheek “Good morning to you too.” She said “They’re currently drowsing in the Common Room.” Though they were a couple, Hannah wouldn’t say anything about the intimate scene she’d helped disguise. Not to Ron, not to anybody.

“Hiya Ron” Ginny Weasley greeted her brother with a smile. She had only returned to the school after dinner Friday. Rather coolly, she nodded at Hannah, saying “Abbott.”

The Hufflepuff gave her a hard stare and replied “Weasley.”

“Hannah, please.” said Ron. He didn’t want to be in the middle of a fight. He was still tired from Susan’s party. All he really wanted to do was eat, then nap again. Fred and George were still up in their dorm.

“I wanna talk to Harry.” Ginny said “We --- well --- one thing --- what he did at Seamus’ trial was wicked.”

Hannah glared at her “Don’t think you’re just going to walk back into Harry’s life!” she snapped.

“I don’t think what I do is any of your business, Abbott!” Ginny replied with equal hostility.

Ron clutched his ears and snarled “Stop yelling!”

“Sorry Ron.” Hannah said, emotionlessly. She wasn’t about to acknowledge it openly, but she was stuck in a big way. Susan was absolutely her best friend. She couldn’t imagine anything shaking that. And, she hadn’t liked Ginny ever since what she called the Prophet Incident. The two redheaded witches had exchanged particularly nasty letters in full view of the Wizarding public. Hannah’s problem was how much of that was exactly Ginny’s fault. And, now that she was dating Ron, the situation had suddenly changed.

Gideon Prewett, freed from a solid three weeks of trials, was now able to return to what he enjoyed. When Amelia Bones had approached him to join her group, it had taken a mere three seconds for him to decide. The old man knew he didn’t have too many years left. And, this was the most thrilling time he’d had in decades. It was invigorating! “Now, now Ginevra.” he said “After everything you’d been through, no need to get all riled up.”

“I can take care of myself, Great-grandfather.” she muttered.

The oldest wizard at the school gave a sour look and scolded her “Ginevra...I realize you’ve had a difficult time...The best thing you can do is start anew with everybody. For example, this is a fine young boy----”

“Granpa!” Ron complained “Me and Gin do know each other!”

Hannah giggled, brought out of her funk by the old man’s antics.

“You, I believe, are an Abbott young lady.” Gideon said. He gallantly took her hand and kissed the back of it. Then added “I quite approve. There has not been an Abbott in the Prewett line in centuries.”

Now Ron muttered, aping his sister “Great-grandfather! Don’t mind him, Hannah! He’s ancient!”

“So you don’t see us marrying?” she said with a pout. And...when he looked horrified...she giggled “Don’t worry, Ron, you’re safe from Paragraph twenty-one.”

Gideon cackled, then said “This one’s a fire-cracker. I think...perhaps...you and she could make fair friends.” he looked between Ginny and Hannah.

Both girls had sour looks. Neither spoke.

## 34 – Quidditch Finals and OWLs

Between one thing and another, Ginny's efforts to talk to Harry met with frustration. But, she finally managed to catch him alone. "Harry" she said "I'd like to talk with you."

"Alright, I guess. I was heading to lunch." He replied "How're you feeling?"

She fell in step with Harry as they traversed the halls. The thought of possibly not ever having children crossed Ginny's mind, but all she said was "Madam Pomfrey still wants me to come by regularly, but I'm better. Those potions Seamus was slipping me are all cleared out."

"I'm glad." Harry said "So...ahh...what's on your mind?"

Ginny laughed sourly and said "A lot...a whole lot. But, first, can I ask about what you did at the trial?"

"Didn't think Finnegan was punished enough." He commented with a grin "Revenge is sweet."

At that, Ginny really laughed "Tonks was here. She showed me her pensieve memory of Seamus waking up after the sentence was carried out. She had to explain what a GI Joe was. I can't remember (hahaha) when I laughed so much."

"Same here" Harry said.

As her amusement subsided, Ginny said "Let me get back on topic. My Great-Grandfather Prewett told me I should make --- there --- That is --- Harry, do you think we could be friends again?"

"To be honest...Ginny ---ahh---" Harry said, thrown completely off "I...uhhh...I --- There's a lot I don't get ...A lot's happened. And then, Sue---"

Ginny interrupted, scowling "You let her run your life!"

"She's my girlfriend...you're not." Harry said, coldly and turned to walk away.

Ginny felt a flash of fury, but forced it down "Wait!" she said, grabbing his elbow "Harry, I meant what I said! What I want---actually I don't know what I want...I---"

"Maybe." Said Harry, then he faced her again "Look...at least we can stop fighting. But...err...really ----Friends? --- I dunno. But, I'll tell Susan about our talk. We'll see."

Ginny nodded, accepting the answer, but not agreeing or disagreeing. "See ya later, Harry." She said as they entered the Great Hall.

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"Showing off again?" Harry asked of his girlfriend. He kissed the top of her head and sat down next to her.

Susan was holding a large flagon of water and concentrating on only freezing the innermost portion. Harry's interruption distracted her and the whole thing froze solid. "Prat!" she exclaimed and slapped his shoulder.

"Sorry." He replied, not sounding particularly so. "And, may I say, you look gorgeous today."

Susan's irritation vanished "Full of compliments this morning ain'tcha." She said, before kissing Harry lightly.

"Fulla something." Ron, who was sitting on the opposite side of Hannah, quipped.

When Harry didn't fire back, Susan studied him appraisingly and asked "Anything wrong?"

"I wouldn't say...wrong...exactly." He replied, haltingly. "Strange...definitely not expected...I ...umm... that is --- talked with Ginny."

Ron immediately reacted "Come on, Harry!" he snapped "Can't ya give'er a break!"

"It wasn't like that Ron!" Harry snapped right back "You know what? Forget I said anything!"

Inquisitor Umbridge, enjoying the absence of her nemesis had been passing by "Mr. Potter" she scolded "it is unseemly to display temper in public."

"Aww!" groaned Harry, glaring at her "Bugger off, bitch!"

Professor Weasley, who was trailing in the Inquisitor's wake went off "You will show proper respect for a Ministry Official, Potter!!"

"You can bugger off too, Percy!" Harry shot back without even thinking. He'd been annoyed with Ron and it just spilled over.

Confrontations between Harry and Umbridge were routine, boring even. This, however, brought silence to the Great Hall. No one could remember such an open, public defiance of a Professor. Percy was now probably the least popular Professor now that Snape was gone, but, still.

"Potter! You have detention for the rest of the term! And one hundred points from Gryffindor!" Professor Weasley declared "You will be reporting to Mr. Filch!"

The scruffy man's eyes lit up with delight. He still nursed a long grudge against the rebellious brat for hurting his beloved Mrs. Norris.

For a moment, Harry had been in shock. He knew he'd crossed the line. But, the severity of the punishment got his blood up. He went nose to nose with Percy and snarled "I-SAID-BUGGER-OFF!"

"Sit down, boy!" a puce red Percy ordered.

At another time, that had provoked Harry to attack the Minister of Magic. Now the use of his uncle's favorite form of address left Harry in a cold rage. "Go for your wand!" he challenged.



“Harry! Percival!” the sharp voice of the Headmaster lashed out. “I will see both of you in my office at once!”

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“That a Gryffindor should be seen behaving so!” Professor McGonagall was saying to Harry while they waited for the Headmaster’s arrival. “Were this situation my decision I would---”

Harry cut her off “What! Take more points? Gryffindor doesn’t have any anyway!”

“I quite agree, Minerva.” Umbridge said “The boy has no respect for authority. You should be expelled, Potter.”

Feeling picked on, and badly outnumbered, Harry yelled “SHUT UP! I WASN’T FINISHED!” then he turned back to McGonagall “You forget what happened after Finnegan’s trial?”

“Harry, please.” The measured voice of Dumbledore said “First...Percival...being fully aware of the difficulty between Madam Umbridge and Harry---“

Harry scoffed at that “Difficulty” he snorted.

“---As I was saying” Dumbledore continued “You merely inflamed a situation that might have faded. Hopefully...with time...you will learn how to properly handle similar occurrences better.”

“Teehee.” Harry giggled. The sound came out before he could suppress it. Seeing a teacher get a lecture was every kid’s dream. He blushed, slightly embarrassed, when the adults scowled at him.

Instead of protesting, Percy nodded with great dignity and said “Yes Headmaster.”

“Now, Harry, I must insist that you stop antagonizing Inquisitor Umbridge.” Dumbledore ordered in soft tones.

Harry went off “Anyone remember the sodding Blood Quill?! Keep her away from me!!”

“Obviously, expulsion is the only solution.” Umbridge offered “It is too bad that many of the old punishments have gone away. Headmaster, if Mr. Potter is not expelled, I will go over your head.”

McGonagall cut in “I do not believe such a discussion should occur in the presence of a student. Potter, you are dismissed.”

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That evening, Harry did not report to Mr. Filch for detention. Instead, he went to the scheduled DL meeting.

“Harry!” Hermione was scandalized “What about the detention?!”

Harry shrugged it off “While everyone was having fun reading Third Year Defense books, I sent Hedwig with a letter to Madam Bones asking her to review the case. I ain’t going. Right, everyone, let’s get to work!”

“Brilliant!” the overwhelming majority of the group declared, almost at the same time.

The Defense League had all agreed that the best thing for them to do was really review for OWLs and NEWTs. Not the reading they did in class, but actual spell work. Ginny Weasley and Colin Creevey, the only Fourth Years, managed to keep up with the Fifth Years (with Ginny being rather better). Colin’s younger brother Dennis, and Hufflepuff’s Seeker Ben Cadwallader, the youngest of all did the best they could. Which wasn’t at all bad, they were sure to do well on the Third Year finals.

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After reviewing reports from Xenophilis Lovegood and Gideon Prewett, Amelia overturned all of Harry’s punishment. She had almost done so the moment she received her client’s letter. But, in the

interest of appearances, waited until after seeing her colleagues' positions. Lucius Malfoy had not been present that day.

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"Cornelius, Bones and Dumbledore are scheming to take over." Madam Umbridge told the Minister of Magic during a private meeting she had demanded after Amelia's ruling.

The Minister took off his spectacles and rubbed his eyes "I just do not believe it, Delores." He argued "Dumbledore has always said he only wants to be Headmaster."

"Have you forgotten that you're only Minister because Dumbledore refused it?" she asked "He believes he could have it any time he wants."

Fudge shook his head "You have no proof."

"And do you propose waiting until he's at this desk before acting?" she countered "Dumbledore could have enforced Weasley's punishment of Potter. But, no, he backed Bones. For that matter...what of Weasley's Muggle loving father? How do we know what he's been up to all these years?"

Suspicion erupted in the Minister's eyes "What do you propose, Delores?" he asked.

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"A fine May day it is!" Lee Jordan's voice boomed across the school's Quidditch Pitch. The black boy's voice had morphed into a deep man's voice since Harry had first heard it. "Welcome to Hogwarts final match of the season! This is for all the marbles! The chase for the Cup is a tight one! Hufflepuff's upset win over Slytherin, combined with a massacre of Ravenclaw by Gryffindor has left a mere twenty points between the leaders! Today's game ---- I give you Gryffindor vs Hufflepuff!!"

Harry, sitting next to Hermione, cheered along with the rest of Gryffindor. Though, not as enthusiastically. In the Hufflepuff stands, Susan was similarly muted. The couple much preferred Ravenclaw/Slytherin games when they could sit together.

The teams were fairly evenly matched. Ron was less experienced than Hufflepuff's captain and goalie. So Hufflepuff had a point lead, but not a huge one. At first, Hufflepuff managed to run up an eighty point advantage. But, as the game began its third hour, Gryffindor had reduced that to thirty points.

The Snitch had appeared on two separate occasions during the first two hours. Both Seekers saw it buzzing around mid-pitch. However, it shot off into the sun. That happened in the early minutes of the game. Then, it had appeared when Hufflepuff held a commanding lead. Ginny and Ben had been circling the pitch like a pair of boxers, following and chasing the other. The treacherous gold ball had zipped right between them. The two Seekers broke and twisted so hard that they collided. It disappeared while the two were checked for injuries.

What ultimately decided the contest was Ben using Harry's Firebolt LX as opposed to Ginny, who was using the school's older Comet 260. They had spotted the Snitch very nearly simultaneously. But, the Hufflepuff Seeker was both lighter and flying a faster broom.

The Hufflepuff box erupted in cheers the moment Madam Hooch's whistle blew and she announced the winner. Most Gryffindors bemoaned the loss. A few politely applauded. Ben had made a good catch. Harry stomped his feet and whistled raucously. Harry wasn't friends with Ginny, and Ben was his protégé. Embarrassed, Hermione stepped up her applause, because she was standing next to him.

The teams passed each other in procession, slapping hands as they did so. Ginny had caught Ben's hand and they exchanged a few words. This was followed by the Quidditch Cup Award Ceremony in which Headmaster Dumbledore awarded the gleaming gold trophy to a jubilant Professor Sprout. The Head of Hufflepuff was beside herself with delight. A disappointed looking Professor McGonagall

shook her hand formally. Then Sprout handed the Cup to Hufflepuff's captain and the team raced around the pitch for a victory lap (or two).

"You suck, Potter!" came from directly above. It was Angelina Johnson. She splattered Harry with a fistful of mud from the pitch.

Hermione had been hit as well. She looked up and yelled "Detention for you, Johnson!"

"Sod off Mudblood!" the angry girl yelled back "Potter cost us the season!"

Harry saw her going for her wand, pulled his first and blasted her with an "Expelliarmus!"

"Arresto Momentum!" Hermione cast just a second later as Angelina fell off her broom. The girl landed in the Gryffindor stands hard enough to crack the floor. But, other than being dazed, she was unharmed.

A furious Professor McGonagall was first on the scene. "What is the meaning of this—this ---outrage!?! " she demanded "Potter! Granger! Put your wands away at once!"

"Minerva, please." Dumbledore said mildly upon his arrival. "Harry, Hermione, please explain."

Harry gave both professors a harsh glare and said "Why bother? You'll just say I'm turning evil ---AGAIN!"

"I would leave him alone, Professors." Hermione said as he stalked off. She was rather surprised at herself.

Angelina had recovered by this point "Potter attacked me, Professor McGonagall!" she yelled.

"Wrong Johnson!" Hermione shot back "I saw you going for your wand, too! It's not Harry's fault he's faster!"

The Head of Gryffindor had had the most difficult year of her career. She, following the Headmaster's instructions, had lost the trust of a favored student. And, apparently, kept making wrong assumptions. She really needed to sit down with Harry. He, though, was a single problem. Far more involved was the simmering feud between the two sides of the Weasley/Finnegan case. She could not allow that to turn violent again. "Miss Johnson" she said, feeling weary "You will comply with Miss Granger's detention. And, I am warning you, DO NOT antagonize Mr. Potter. Is that understood?"

“But Professor!” Katie protested “Potter atta---

McGonagall cut her off “Is that understood? Miss Johnson?”

“My father’s on the Board of Directors!” Angelina declared stubbornly.

Addressing her, stonily McGonagall said “Miss Johnson, you will return to your dormitory immediately. You may come out for dinner. Then you will return at the conclusion of the meal period. You may not leave your room except for meals, and classes. Dismissed!”

“Minerva, perhaps that was a bit harsh.” The Headmaster said.

She didn't reply to that, rather she addressed Hermione "Please find Mr. Potter and tell I would like him to see me in my office." Only after the Fifth Year girl departed did she address her boss "And, perhaps, Albus, we have all erred when it comes to Potter. I will thank you not to undermine me in front of my students. You never did that to Severus."

“Minerva---” Dumbledore began, but he was talking to her retreating back.

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Harry, however, shortly after he'd met up with Susan had been handed a note by another student to go to the Headmaster's office. "Th'bloody hell could he want now?" he moaned.

“Do come in, Harry.” Dumbledore said by way of greeting “Might I offer you a lemon drop?”

The boy shook his head. He was only about ten feet into the room and didn’t approach further “I’d rather not.” He replied.

“Harry, you and I used to have great trust in each other---“ he began

Harry cut him off “No, sir.” he said accusingly “You mean I used to do everything you said. And why should I trust you? You helped Snape rob me blind and never answer my questions!”

“Harry, Profe---“

Again, cutting off the Headmaster, “He’s not a bloody Professor no more!” shouted Harry “Did you forget he almost murdered Susan and crucio’d me!”

“Everyone deserves a second chance, Harry.” Dumbledore argued.

Harry gave a disgusted snort “Or a hundred! But not me!!”

“I do not understa---“

This time, the interruption didn’t come from Harry. It came in the form of several new intruders. A troop of armored Aurors forced their way in, pushing Harry aside and glaring at the Headmaster. After glaring at every corner of the Headmaster’s office, they parted to admit the Minister and the High Inquisitor.

“Dumbledore.” Minister Fudge said by way of greeting.

The Headmaster smiled placidly and replied “Good afternoon, Cornelius. What can I do for you today?”

“Per Educational Decree #34” the Minister announced “Due to irregularities in educational standards at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the Ministry has determined the need for an immediate regime change. Effective immediately, Albus Dumbledore is hereby removed from the post of Headmaster. The Ministry hereby

requests and requires the Hogwarts Board of Governors to meet for the purpose of appointing a new Headmaster.”

Harry interrupted him by shoving back at the Auror who had pushed him. It had been like hitting a brick wall. The man was over six foot and topped 300 pounds. Harry was plucked off his feet and thrown aside like a discarded toy.

“Don’t even think about it, boy.” The Auror said, menacingly.

Harry got to his feet angrily.

Fudge had resumed reading “Albus Dumbledore is hereby ordered to vacate the premises forthwith. Failure to comply will lead to immediate arrest. The Ministry acknowledges the need to maintain leadership at the school. Therefore, in the interim, High Inquisitor Delores Umbridge will assume the position as Acting Headmistress. Said appointment effective immediately.”

“Take my advice, Albus.” Umbridge said sweetly “Depart peacefully. You can retire quietly. The Aurors will be gentle with you.”

A hard expression, rarely seen, appeared on Dumbledore’s face “I have no intention of leaving with you.” He declared. Then he called for his phoenix “Fawkes!” The two exploded in a flash of fire, and were gone.

“COWARD!” Harry yelled. Despite the bad blood between them, he had been heartened by the old wizard’s defiant declaration. But, the abrupt departure had turned that hope into betrayal. Umbridge was giving him that sweet, creepy smile. He cringed, revolted.

She cooed at Fudge and said “Thank you for your faith in me Minister. I shall do my utmost to not disappoint you. I hope the former administration did not hurt the system too badly. My Fifth and Seventh Year students are at such a delicate moment in their young lives.”

“You’re no Headmaster!” growled Harry.



Umbridge, dismissed him with a wave "I know you were a special case with the former Headmaster. But, let me assure you, Mr. Potter, all of my students will receive the same attention. I do not play favorites. You may go."

Harry crossed his arms over his chest, rebelliously.

"Auror Dolohov, this student appears lost." Umbridge said "I wonder if you could assist him back to his dormitory. Mr. Potter is in Gryffindor. He is restricted there until further notice."

The huge man who had thrown Harry so effortlessly grinned evilly and replied "Of course, Madam Umbridge. I know the way. Your permission, Minister?"

Harry tightly held his temper, which was threatening to go off like a bomb. And allowed himself to be 'escorted' to Gryffindor Tower. He'd been out after hours before, and could probably get out again, but he needed to let everyone he could know about Dumbledore's departure. No matter his problems with Dumbledore, who he didn't trust at all. Umbridge could be trusted to do harm.

"And I'll be on guard here, boy." The Auror announced, shoving Harry through the hole behind the Fat Lady's painting.

"That is not the proper way to treat children!" the portrait scolded him.

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"Harry?" queried Hermione. She stood and walked over to him. "What happened with Professor McGonagall?"

Dismissing that with a flick of the wrist, he said "We got bigger problems. Go make sure all the girls come down. I'll get the boys." After the Common Room filled, Harry related everything that had happened in the Headmaster's --- now Headmistress's --- office.

"Bloody Hell!" Ron summed it up rather eloquently. "What're we gonna do now?"

“We’re not gonna---“

“---take this lying down.” Came from Fred and George Weasley.

A lot of Gryffindors blamed Harry for the loss of the Quidditch Cup and were resentful. Dean Thomas, additionally, faulted Harry for the loss of his best friend and had stopped going to Defense League meetings “Why should we do anything?” he demanded “And why’s everyone looking at him? Maybe Umbridge will do some good. I’m tell---”

“Obliviate!” Harry cast. No one had seen him pull his wand, it was so fast. The tall black boy’s face went blank. Harry ordered “Go back to bed, Dean.”

A hush fell over the group, into which Hermione objected “Harry! You shouldn’t do that!”

“Never mind that.” Harry snapped “Right...ahhh...that’s it, I guess. I just want to talk to---“ He’d felt suddenly uneasy with the entire House being around. He rattled off the names of the Gryffindors in the DL. Then he asked Hermione to put up a privacy charm around the smaller group.

“So...what’s the plan?” George asked.

Harry shrugged and admitted “Don’t rightly know. I haven’t had time to think things through. But, that toad’s gotta go.”

“Got that right.” Fred commented.

Hermione looked worried “We can’t just go against her. Right or wrong, she is Headmistress.”

“And Dumbledore ran out on us.” Harry growled “There’s no way I’m letting Umbitch start with her detentions again. I’ll kill her first.”

Hermione’s eyes bugged out in shock “Harry! You don’t mean that!”

"After that Blood Quill, forget it!" Harry countered. Then, he looked at the twins "Fred, George...anything you two can come with. Drive her crazy."

For once, they held back "Err...nothing actually violent." Fred said.

"Yeah...right" Harry replied with a nod. He lost a little of his steam, too. "Anyway, you need any extra money, let me know. If I'm stuck here, though...Ron! Get a note to Sue for me! The rest of the school needs to know and she can get to my trunk." He started scratching a quill on parchment.

Ron shook his head "No, Harry. If Umbitch is watching, I can't pass anything to Sue."

"Hmm...I guess" Harry thought out loud "Then Hermione...no...that's just as bad. You could give something to Hannah. DAMN! I gotta get rid of Hagrid's little brother!!"

The group laughed at Harry's description of the Auror guarding the entryway for him.

"No one would suspect me." Offered Ginny.

Harry shrugged and replied, dismissively "That's cause I wouldn't. I guess it'll just wait til tomorrow."

Ginny looked at him crossly, but that was it.

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The next morning, changes were noticed as soon as students made their way to breakfast. The long House tables in the Great Hall repulsed any student not from that House. Ravenclaws sat at their table. But when Neville Longbottom, for example, tried to sit with Luna Lovegood; the Table pushed him away. In Harry's case, there was more extreme enforcement. His 'escort' stood in his path when Harry attempted to even head down the aisle so he could talk with Susan. Ron and Hermione grabbed each arm and pulled him to the Gryffindor Table.

“Hem! Hem! Good Morning, children!” came from the Head Table.

Harry reacted to it like fingernails across a chalkboard.

“Hem! Hem! Good Morning, children!” was repeated. “Thank you! As I am sure you are all aware; my name is Delores Jane Umbridge. Last night...to ensure your well-being...the Minister took the desperately needed measure of removing Albus Dumbledore as Headmaster of Hogwarts. The Board of Directors will meet to formally name a replacement. The Minister has, in this crisis, given me the responsibility to take on that role in the meantime.”

Hushed whispers speculated on the whys and wherefores. But, Harry cut loose with a loud “BOOO!!” and, after a few seconds of silence, he did it again. “BOOO!!” One by one, others joined in. First up were those closest to Harry --- Susan, her sister Tina who was sitting with her friend in Ravenclaw, Hermione, Ron , the Weasley Twins, Neville Longbottom (he didn’t like being parted from Luna).

“YOU DO NOT GET A SAY IN THIS!!” The new Headmistress screeched. Her yell was echoed by the Enchanted Ceiling which rumbled and flashed like a violent storm. It shocked the protesting crowd into silence. Umbridge smiled out from her throne and said “Well, now that that is cleared up, I believe it is time for classes.”

Breakfast had hardly started, which one student pointed out.

“Perhaps you will all remember this in the future.” Umbridge said. And, with a flick of her wand, all of the food vanished.

That brought a round of moans and groans.

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With the departure of the students the new Headmistress faced her first staff crisis in the form of the Potion Mistress “I shall be informing my sister-in-law of your heavy handed conduct.”

"Professor Bones" Umbridge said in her usual sweet voice "You are at liberty to do so. But, I remind you, your tenure here is at the pleasure of the Headmistress. Namely myself. For example --- Professor Trelawney"

The Divination teacher looked over and answered  
“Why...yes...Headmistress.”

“I find you incompetent to teach.” Umbridge declared “You are fired. I will have an Auror assist you in packing. Be off school property within the hour.

The now former Divination teacher broke down in tears “B-but H-Hogwarts i-i-is m-m-my h-h-ome” she sobbed “I d-d-don’t h-h-have anyw-where else t-t-to g-g-go.”

“That was cruel!” an angry McGonagall exclaimed as she comforted the stricken woman. “Come, Sybil, you may stay with me until things settle.”

The new Headmistress interrupted the departing pair “Minerva, dear, I did order her removal from the school.”

"I am not deaf!" McGonagall snapped "But, perhaps, you forget that my home is not on school property. If I choose to have a guest that is my affair."

Umbridge shrugged “As long as my conditions are met. And, Minerva, you will report to your classes as usual.”

“This will not stand.” The Head of Gryffindor declared over her shoulder.

The new Headmistress laughed sweetly and countered “I have the support of the Minister. And we are supported by the Board of Directors in the person of Lucius Malfoy.”

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Later that day, the Fifth Year Divination class was waiting to take their OWL exam. Professor Trelawney was several minutes late and the students were buzzing about, talking.

“Hem! Hem!!” was heard over the bustle.

Harry flinched and went for his wand. Hermione, beside him, blocked the movement.

“Good morning, students!” Umbridge announced as she entered... and waited... then “I SAID Good Morning, Students!”

Unenthusiastically, the class replied “Good morning.”

“Well, we can work on that.” She observed “Certainly, before this term ends. Possibly into the Fall, as well. At any rate, I shall be proctoring your OWL Examination.”

Lavender Brown put up her hand and asked “Excuse me, Professor, but where’s Professor Trelawney?”

"I would prefer to be addressed as Headmistress." Umbridge replied  
"Now, boys and girls---

Lavender interrupted "Sorry, Headmistress. But, please, where is----

“Ten points from Gryffindor, Miss Brown. And detention tonight with Mr. Filch!” Umbridge overrode her “Now...as I was saying...You have three hours for this test. At this point, some instructors would wish you good luck. I do not believe in luck, good or bad. You either know the material, or you do not. Begin!”

When the grueling period was over, Harry looked at his quill as if it had betrayed him. He knew full well that only Hermione's help had even gotten him a passing grade. And, his mind had yet to comprehend that just passing meant he didn't necessarily have to go on for NEWT classes.

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In the Great Hall, Harry was once again 'guided' to sit at Gryffindor's Table. Ron, at least, had managed to talk to Hannah. Harry could only give his girlfriend a forlorn gaze. Across the room, she blew him a kiss. Then she touched her chest at her heart, clasped her hands together and pointed at him. Harry smiled broadly and returned the gesture.

"Didn't think you'd smile today." Hannah Abbott teased her best friend.

While her boyfriend had been taking the Divination OWL, Susan had her Astronomy one. After Harry's schedule was altered to accommodate the Wizard Government class, it was only class time they didn't share. Later that week she would be sitting the Divination OWL, and him Astronomy. "Aww...stuff yourself." She grumbled.

"Hey Suzy!" a brightly smiling Tina Bones exclaimed.

Susan gave her sister a warning look and growled "Don't call me that! And what makes you so happy? And why are you allowed to go where you want?"

"Well..ll" the younger girl drawled out "Question two answered question one. And, I can because I don't have a House. Darn useful sorta thing. Don'cha think? Besides ---annoys Umbitch no end."

Hannah, the Prefect, hissed at her "Watch it!"

"Wha'd'ya want anyway?" asked Susan in a distracted tone. She was returning Harry's longing gaze.

Tina snapped her fingers in her sister's face and grabbed her chin "Pay attention!" she said sharply.

"What!?"

"So...she banned Harry from Hufflepuff. So what?" asked Tina "Did she ban you from Gryffindor?"

A knowing smile formed on Susan's lips and she nodded. Throwing an arm around Tina, she said "Very good point, lil'sis, very good point."

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"Sooo...did you pass on our idea?" George Weasley asked of the youngest Bones, as they were filing out of the Great Hall.

Tina shrugged nonchalantly and replied "Don't you mean MY idea? But yes."

"What!?" Fred hissed at her "Stealing credit!" He slapped a tickling hex on the girl.

Tina doubled over laughing. It only lasted a few seconds. Using that unique Bones talent, she formed a snowball in her hand and lobbed it, catching Fred square in the ear. She laughed, this time in amusement, "Cool, huh?" she said. And ran off with her friends before Fred could retaliate.

"I think we've created a monster." George observed, greatly amused.

Fred snorted and spluttered "It is war!" he declared.

"Troubles boys?" Susan asked carelessly.

Still with snow in his ear, Fred lied "Nope, don't know what you're talking about."

"So...this ---ahh--- condition is normal?" asked Susan.

Fred held his composure, resisting the urge to wipe his ear and repeated "Don't know what you're talking about, Bonesie."

"How come they don't get in trouble for saying that?" Harry complained, he came up from behind and wrapped his arms around her waist.



Susan gripped his hands and leaned back “Missed you.” She said, before twisting her head around for a kiss. They smacked lips together loudly.

“Off with you two! You have class!” Harry’s escort addressed the twins harshly. Then, turning to his charge “And so do you, Potter!”

The Auror had finally really ticked Harry off. He tensed and went for his wand.

Susan had felt her boyfriend's tension and subtly maneuvered them so she was facing the Auror "Hi!" she said, with a false smile and holding out a hand "I'm Susan Bones!"

"I am aware of your identity." The Auror replied sourly. He made no effort to shake.

Susan shrugged and, still using her happy voice, said “Well! I’ll make sure to tell my Auntie what a good job you do! Just as soon as I can send an owl!”

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“Is there something you need Auror Dolohov?” asked Professor Bones. Barely contained fury radiated off the usually pleasant teacher. “I was under the impression you had retired.”

Likewise, Susan, who had just restrained Harry outside the Great Hall, wore a look of loathing “Everyone knows he killed Uncle Edgar!” she whispered harshly. “If I’d a known I’d a let you blast him one!”

“Cool it, Sue!” Harry growled as he fought to control her. “You were right earlier.”

The huge man smiled, it was nasty. Not just the expression, but he displayed several rotted teeth. "The Senior Undersecretary called me back to duty." He announced "Special assignment under her direct authority. Pleasure to see you Joanie."

“Only students and professors are permitted in classrooms.” Professor Bones said, voice dripping with contempt “GETOUT!”

The Auror leaned himself casually up against the back wall “No can do, sweetie.” He taunted “Never know what that trouble-maker, Potter, will do.

“.....” the furious professor whispered. No student was close enough to hear. And a very intense, and concentrated, blast of wind shoved the hulking Auror out of the classroom. The same burst swept back in and pushed the door shut.

Hermione's hand shot into the air "Professor Bones! What spell was that?" she asked

“That -- was – not – precisely – a spell –“ the still seething professor said, jerkily. Joan fought with her temper. “Professors have certain access to the wards about the school. Now, moving on, this afternoon is the written potion of your Potions OWL. Tomorrow, you will be here all day brewing. Remember, there are many occupations that require high Potion OWL scores. Now, spread your seats as far apart as possible.”

Grumbling, the students obeyed. Ron gave voice to it saying “It’s like they don’t trust us!”

“This, Ron, is one occasion where I concur fully with the rules.” Professor Bones scolded him “Studying together is beneficial, but ultimately you are on your own. NO, Vince, you may not sit that close to Draco. Parvati and Lavender, you too. Harry --- Susan --- chop-chop!”

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Three hours later. Sighs of relief, moans of frustration, pleas for more time and various versions of waking up noises filled the classroom. The announcement that the exam was over also automatically dispelled the locking charm on the classroom doors.

"Hello Joan, there is a matter of some minor importance I would like to discuss with you." The new headmistress stated as she walked in, the large Auror who escorted Harry about following in her wake.

Professor Bones acknowledged her and addressed the students "Class dismissed. Except...Susan, you and Harry, please return the seats to normal. Headmistress, shall we step into the corridor? I'll be back in about half an hour."

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"Now wha'd'we do wrong?" complained Susan. She crossed her arms over her chest and frowned at the closed door.

Harry stepped behind her and rubbed her neck "Y'know...seems to me...this ain't a detention."

"Mmmmm." Susan purred. "Don't distract me, Harry. I'm trying to be annoyed at Mum."

Harry nibbled and licked at the back of her neck and encircled her waist. "I'm not." He said.

"That's cause you're her favorite." She quipped "She even takes your side over mine."

He spun her around and pulled her close, asking "Wouldn't you rather be snogging?"

"Hmm...dunno...maybe." She replied with a smirk. She wrapped her arms around his neck "I'll hafta think ab---"

Harry cut her off by kissing her.

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Walking through the stone lined corridor, Umbridge addressed her concerns "You are aware of the escort I detailed to monitor the Potter boy? Are you not?"

"I see no reason for it." Bones countered "Harry is one of the best students."

Umbridge cut her off "Surely, you are not defending him. The boy is a disruptive influence and must be controlled. Joan---"

"That's Professor Bones, Headmistress." The Potions teacher corrected "We are colleagues, not friends."

Umbridge stumbled slightly and colored at the rebuke "Actually, we are superior and subordinate." She replied coldly "Auror Dolohov has orders to follow Potter in all places."

"I WILL NOT HAVE THAT SONOFABITCH IN MY SIGHT!" Bones snarled. She glared down furiously at the Headmistress. "And I would think Aurors have better things to do than follow around sixteen year olds."

Pretending ignorance, Umbridge replied "Auror Dolohov is working his way back into the ranks aft---"

"After my sister-in-law fired the sorry sack of scum!" Bones cut Umbridge off again.

Smiling unpleasantly, the man in question said "Now, Joanie---"

"Do-not-even-think-of-touching-me!" Joan snarled hatefully.

Waving her hand impatiently Umbridge scolded them both "Enough of that! Now...Joan---"

"Professor Bones."

As if she hadn't been interrupted, Umbridge continued "---you will allow---"

"I'll be writing to Amelia at once."

Umbridge gave a beatific smile and said "That will not be possible. School owls may only be used for Official Business."

"This is a School matter." Joan argued.

"All contact between the Ministry and Hogwarts must go through the Headmistress' office." Umbridge declared "After approval---"

Joan gave a disgusted noise "I have no interest in allowing you to read my correspondence! I'll use my own owl!"

"Sadly" Umbridge said, shaking her head "That, too, I cannot permit."

Joan turned angrily on her heels and stormed back, right into her classroom.

"MUMMMM!!!" Susan squealed, equal parts of anger, embarrassment and simple shock filled her voice.

Harry just froze. He had just gotten to the point where he had expertly opened the clasp of his girlfriend's bra. And now his girlfriend's mother had caught him red-handed. Besides that, which he might manage to discretely hide, both their hair were utter disasters. He thought of blaming pixies for that.

"OOOOO!! THAT THAT WOMAN!!" Joan fumed, not even reacting to the distress her bursting in had caused. "Sorry, you two." She added as her brain started working again. "Harry, I wonder if I could ask you for a small favor."

Harry swallowed anxiously and answered "S-s-sh-ure."

"I would like to send a letter to Amelia." Joan said "Might I borrow Hedwig for the job?"

Harry readily agreed. "N-n-o pro-problem." he replied, thankful that Susan's mother had apparently only seen their fingers interlaced in Susan's lap "Just tell her I said it was okay."

"You, Harry Potter, are a peach." She declared, then sat at her desk and began scratching away.

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That night, Professor Bones volunteered for the teachers' patrol. Professor Sprout was only too eager to skip her turn. Joan played it cautious. She first patrolled around the Slytherin Common Room. Then headed outside. She walked through the Owlery without calling on Harry's snowy white owl. Then it was back inside where she checked all the second and third floor classrooms.

She then went through the now vacant guest quarters. With the Minister's backing, the new Headmistress had ordered Luna's Father and Ron's Great-grandfather out of Hogwarts. Amelia was currently gathering Wizengamot support to reverse that. She needed enough to override an expected Fudge veto.

After a walk-thru of the Great Hall, Joan again made her way outside. First, she walked around the Greenhouses. She then entered the Owlery from a different direction than earlier. "Hedwig!" she called out.

The white owl spread her wings and allowed herself to fall from her perch, high up in the rafters. She landed near the human that had called her name and eyed her, curiously.

"We have a new Headmistress that doesn't let Harry out much." Joan explained. After Potions, her next highest NEWT had been in Care of Magical Creatures. She knew just how intelligent magical owls were. "Would you deliver a letter for me?"

Hedwig squawked, leaned forward and looked the human up and down. Then with a regal air, stuck out her leg.

"Thank you." Joan said sincerely. Another witch or wizard might have said it sarcastically, but not her "I promise, Harry agreed. Take this to Amelia Bones, but not at the Ministry. Deliver it to her home, please."

Hedwig squawked twice to confirm her acceptance of the task and spread her wings again. She flapped vigorously to gain altitude and flew off. Before soaring into the clouds, Hedwig always liked to fly by her other favorite human, to say goodbye. So she glided past Hagrid's hut.

“Hope that helps Amelia.” Joan said as the snowy owl vanished into the night sky. She turned back and resumed her patrol. Hopefully, things were looking up.

## 35 – Coup d'etat

Four days later, Fifth Years were luxuriating in the glow of completed OWLs. This even included one Harry James Potter, who was overtly still complaining about the Aurors that persisted in following him around on orders from Headmistress Umbridge. Harry made effective use of his Marauders' Map and Invisibility Cloak to give his Auror escort the slip. He'd even managed two DL meetings after getting 'restricted' to the Gryffindor Common Room.

Harry was feeling quite festive. He had finished his final OWL, Care of Magical Creatures, twenty minutes early. Some things he just didn't remember, but though he knew an O wasn't likely, he was confident that he was in E territory. It would do. He sat there drawing circles aimlessly with his wand.

At this time last year, Harry had still not recovered from the events of the last Tri-Wizard event. He'd had his arm sliced open by Peter Pettigrew in that graveyard and watched Cedric Diggory fall to the Killing Curse. His brutal suffering at the hands of his 'family' followed. He was able to look back at that without difficulty, and even smile at Dumbledore's cowardly departure, since he had no intention of returning and the former Headmaster couldn't make him.

A big negative was the discovery that he'd been robbed blind for years. To the tune of a few million Galleons. It had destroyed his already damaged trust in Dumbledore, for the way the old man had twisted his parents' will. But, that all worked out for the best. Snape was a convicted, penniless, fugitive and gone from Hogwarts. And, as an added bonus, Sirius was now a free man.

To say Harry's love life had been a mess would be an understatement. Soap Opera --- was the term one student, a transfer from America, had described it as. Once she explained the term, he agreed. Regardless, though, of the tangled mess with Ginny Weasley, he could only smile as Susan's image floated across his awareness.

"HARRY!!" Professor Hagrid finally bellowed, with the full power of his half-giant lungs.



Harry was jolted out of his contemplation and nearly fell out of his seat. Much to the amusement of his fellow students. "Err...sorry." He mumbled, sheepishly.

"Qu-y awrigh' 'Arry." The professor replied softly. "Th' 'xams o'er."

Harry stood up and grabbed his books from under his desk "Well, see ya next year, I guess --- Professor."

"Jus' a moment 'Arry." Said Hagrid "I dinna bring this up ahfore th' 'xam---"

Harry rolled his eyes impatiently "This is getting real old, Hagrid!" he snapped "I know why you think Dumbledore's so great. I just don't!"

"Tha's no' it, 'Arry." The half-giant replied. A great sob shook the massive body "I'm sorry to break this to ye. But it's 'Edwig. I found the poor girl ou'side me 'ouse this morning. She's de---"

Harry clamped his hands over his ears and shook his head violently in denial "NOOOO!!" he roared "LIAR! LIAR!!!" Every sense of joy and peace he had been feeling exploded. He lashed out with his fists pounding on Hagrid.

"Oh...Harry." Hermione said, pityingly "I'm so sorry."

Harry paused just long enough to shout at her "ITS NOT TRUE!!"

"Come on, mate." Said Ron and he went to pull him away.

Hagrid pushed him back. Harry wasn't an undersized, undernourished twelve year old anymore. But, the half giant still stood two feet taller. He blocked Ron and said "S'alright...if it makes 'Arry feel better."

"Sorry Hagrid." Harry said faintly. He'd stopped in mid-swing when he heard Hagrid's remark. Somehow, hitting someone who wasn't defending himself seemed wrong.

Hagrid waved it off "No 'arm done." He assured.

"The rest of the class is gone!" Auror Dolohov announced as he burst in "Potter is restricted to his Common Room." He grabbed Harry by the collar.

"Ge' yer ands' off'im!" Hagrid shouted, backhanding the offender. Who flew across the room and out into the corridor. The body sagged down and lay still. Instantly regretful, he muttered "Oh my."

Hermione rushed out and bent over the prone Auror. She checked his pulse and put her hand under his nose. "A disgrace to the Auror force." She announced "He shouldn't be sleeping on the job."

Harry and Ron looked at each other with their jaws hanging, then at her, then back at each other. Harry didn't have much of a smile to offer. But Ron exclaimed "WICKED!" He walked over to the prone man and kicked him in the stomach. "That wasn't no fun! He didn't even groan!"

"Ron, Hermione, I got me Second Years." said Hagrid "Why don't you take 'Arry down to me 'ouse. 'Edwig's wrapped in a blanket in me kitchen."

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In another part of the castle, and unaware of the latest tragedy to befall her boyfriend, Susan Bones was having her scheduled career counseling session. Traditionally, this was with the student's Head of House. But, the Headmistress had taken a special interest, so both were in attendance.

Professor Sprout smiled at one of her stars "Nothing at all to be nervous about, Susan."

"I'm not, Professor." She replied, eyeing the Headmistress.

"Well, why don't we start with your ambitions?" the Head of Hufflepuff suggested.

With a visible effort, Susan looked away from Umbridge and said "Well, the truth is, I'm a little torn. One thing I've been looking at is going for a Potion Mastery. The other is ---well--- I think the Ministry needs a shakeup. I'd like to be Minister at some point."

"Both lofty goals." Sprout commented "But nothing less than I expected. You are the top student in Wizard Government in your year and your Potions grades indicate you could have the potential to Master. We'll know better when you get your OWL scores. I do wish you scored higher in Herbology."

Susan lost her fight with a blush and replied "Sorry Professor." She wasn't counting on higher than and Acceptable OWL in her Head's subject.

"Well...Susan...you have a unique set of resources for eith---"

HemHem!

"--- your Mother or your Aunt Amelia. If you pursue Poti---"

HemHem!

"Minerva was right!" Professor Sprout snapped "That is bloody annoying! What!?" Susan didn't bother repressing a giggle.

Glaring at both her subordinate and the student Umbridge said "We shall take up insubordination outside the hearing of children, Pomona. Regarding Miss Bones, I am concerned with you not discouraging an unrealistic ambition in a student."

"I feel both careers are well suited to Miss Bones' education." Professor Sprout said coldly "In fact, Susan, I have noticed a marked improvement in your Defense Against the Dark Arts grades. Especially, this term. I doubted you would continue into the NEWT class. I suggest you consider Auror as a possible career as well."

For the first time in the meeting, Umbridge smiled "Ahh...a tribute, no doubt to the teaching skills of my own protégé. Professor Weasley only needed the right environment in which to excel."

"That's" Susan began sharply, only to bite her tongue when both adults looked at her. She'd almost dropped the DL secret. Meekly, she concluded "Sure...that, that must be...it. And, having Aunt Amelia around, too."

Looking as if she had bitten into something vile, the Headmistress said "Indeed... Actually, Miss Bones, it would be your governmental ambitions that concern me. The Wizarding public looks to its top officials to exemplify the Wizarding ideal."

"What?" asked Susan irritably.

Umbridge nodded condescendingly "It is as I thought." She said "Such naiveté, surely you have noted in your Government class that all Ministers of Magic have been pure of blood."

"That explains a lot, in my opinion." Susan shot back. She flushed slightly, remembering her Head of House "Err...no --- that is to say --- no offense Professor Sprout."

Pomona was frankly thrilled with the girl's backbone. She'd vote for her in a heartbeat. Of course, now wasn't the time. She simply replied "None taken, Miss Bones."

"In fact" added Susan, intending to twist the knife deeper "maybe I'll name Hermione Granger as my Undersecretary and resign! Wouldn't that be a kick!?"

Pomona knew it was undignified, especially in front of a student, but couldn't help it. She burst out laughing.

HEM! HEM! HEM! Umbridge coughed. Eventually getting the laughing professor to stop. "Now that you bring it up, there is also the matter of your associations, my dear." She added "In particular, I am thinking of Harry Potter. Surely with your family's standing you could manage a better match. And perhaps you cou--"

"HAHAHA!" Susan laughed in her face "Harry! Bad for my reputation!!" A stray thought told her that her relationship with Harry

would likely boost her chances in politics, but she didn't voice that, though.

The conference was interrupted by the arrival of an angry Auror Dolohov "Potter gave me the slip!" he snarled.

"Hmpf!" grunted Susan, disgustedly. She hated the ugly man for the death of her Uncle Edgar and for his constant interference in her and Harry's lives. "You'd think a trained Auror could keep an eye on a teenager. You're pathetic!"

Red with fury, the Headmistress snapped "Well! Find him! Get some help! MOVE!!" Then she turned on Susan "And you, child. I am sure Mr. Filch can find some cleaning projects tonight. Teach you proper respect for your elders. Now, I think this meeting is finished." Umbridge hurried out of the room.

"Bloody great!" Susan groused as she slumped in her seat. "Wonder what made Harry do that."

Professor Sprout cautioned her "I know that look. You learned it from your Aunt."

"Why...thanks PomPom!" Susan replied mischievously. "Err...am...that is...can I go Professor?"

Sighing tolerantly, the Head of Hufflepuff said "Right. Off with you, then."

"Let's see, now." Susan thought out loud "If I were Harry, where would I be? Just had his Care of Magical Creatures OWL...I'll start there!"

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Inside Hagrid's cluttered hut, where everything was rather oversized for them, Harry sat in an easy chair that also had room for Hermione. In his lap was Hedwig's body. He'd unwrapped the blanket enough to reveal the owl's face and he was gently stroking her beak with his

thumb. "She looks like she's just sleeping." He sobbed "Y'know she was my only real friend til you guys---"

"Dunno what to say, mate." said Ron, uncomfortably "Sorry, I guess...uhh..." He was perched on the arm of the chair and gripping Harry's shoulder.

Hermione, who wasn't keen on touching the dead owl, held Harry's other hand between her own. "It probably doesn't help much, Ron." she said kindly "But, it is a nice thought. Harry...it's OK...you can cry on me."

It was like she had opened the floodgates. Harry wept unashamedly, non-stop, for ten minutes. Then, another few sniffles, and as suddenly as he started, he stopped. "Made a mess of your shirt." He apologized, feebly.

"Not another word about that." Hermione scolded him, gently.

That was when a well-informed Susan opened the door to the hut and walked in. She pulled one of Hagrid's massive wooden chairs over, kissed Harry on the forehead and sat across from them. The group just sat there quietly, Harry lost in thought and the others there should he need anything.

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Five people sat around a desk in a Ministry office. "The time to act is now." One declared.

"This administration has gone from passive, to incompetent, to oppressive." Another groused.

The third voice counseled caution "Precipitous action could lead us down a slippery slope."

"Less talk! More action!" the fourth demanded. A sharp thump added another exclamation point.

The final one glared at the third and said “We have no choice! Very well, it’s decided. We will take twenty Aurors and secure Hogwarts. You three will seize Fudge, the Auror Academy and Wizarding Wireless.”

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The peaceful, but sad, scene in Hagrid’s hut was abruptly shattered into total chaos. Aurors, led by Dolohov, invaded the place. They smashed through both of Hagrid’s doors. Two of the invaders shattered the windows and one followed the other through it.

In seconds, the completely unprepared students were face down on the floor, with heavy boots on their necks. All four of them had also been relieved of their wands. They could hear the sounds of the hut being ransacked. Harry wasn’t even conscious. In the initial melee, he’d punched one of the Aurors that overturned the easy chair and gotten stunned for his efforts. Ron, Susan and Hermione were awake but ‘restrained for their protection.’

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“Malfoy!” snarled Harry at the first face he saw.

The blond Slytherin had his wand-point digging into Neville Longbottom’s throat. “Lookin’ forward to this for a long time Potter.” Draco sneered “All that sickening inter-House sweetness...turns my stomach.”

“Well said, Mr. Malfoy.” Headmistress Umbridge said “You have been most helpful in spying out this renegade organization.”

Ron struggled in an Auror’s grasp “Never trusted you!” he growled “Filthy fucking ferret!”

“Silence!” the Auror holding Ron commanded. And, after a nod from the Headmistress, pulled the redhead from his seat, punched the student in the stomach and lifted his knee into Ron’s face as he doubled over.

Umbridge's face kept its beatific smile "Do watch your language Mr. Weasley." She said "On to other business. Mr. Potter, I understand you to be the ringleader of this organization. Now, while Mr. Malfoy has ably obtained many, I want them all. Parchment and Quill on my desk. Begin!"

"That's a Blood Quill!" shouted Susan. They'd seen Umbridge put it on the desk before Harry woke up. Susan tried to stand, but was forced back into her seat and backhanded across the mouth.

Harry surged forward, but his guard locked a chokehold on him. "Don't...know what...you're talkin'bout!" he snarled, hatefully.

"I suppose some discipline is in order first!" sighed Umbridge "Secure Mr. Potter to his chair, leaving his right hand free. Everyone else out!"

Susan fought as she was pulled to her feet "Harry!" she exclaimed "Demand your solicitor!!"

"On second thought...." Umbridge reflected "...You stay Miss Bones."

Their least favorite Auror said "I'll remain, Headmistress, for your protection."

"Auror Dolohov" she replied "I am perfectly capable of defending myself against two unarmed ---and bound--- students."

The chair, Harry's legs, left arm and torso all glowed a faint blue. As did Susan, except that everything below her neck glowed. He growled "Let Susan go!"

"You are in no position to make demands, Mr. Potter." Umbridge said, sweetly. She aimed her wand "Now. Imperio!"

Harry's eyes glazed over for a moment, then cleared "You'll have to do better than that, bitch!" he snarled.

"Very well, I can simply see it in your mind." She gloated, ignoring the insult. "Legilimens!"



Harry had only learned, after he woke up, that it was Nicolas Flamel whose presence had taught him to restore his natural mental shield. Nicolas had also shown him how to repulse the type of battering-ram style attacks the former Head of Slytherin used. The Headmistress was no different in technique.

"I...see" Umbridge said, tightly. She had to shake off the mental equivalent of running into a brick wall. "Very well, I see I have no choice. In the best interest of the Government, I must ...as unpleasant as it is. Please believe me, Mr. Potter, this hurts me fully as much as it does you Crucio!"

"That's illegal!" Susan cried "HARRY!!"

Convulsing violently and thrashing around, Harry grunted and groaned under the torture spell. He refused to scream, not wanting to give her the satisfaction. When the spell faded, he smiled at her and sneered "Snape's was worse. And that was nothing compared to Voldemort."

"Hmm...remarkable...not many can tolerate the Cruciatus." She commented, walking around her desk to stand directly in front of him. She stroked his cheek with a finger.

Harry spit in her face and cursed "Fuck you!"

"So sad... to see a student fall astray..." she said as she flicked the liquid attack from her cheek. "Let us see what would be an appropriate punishment?"

"Heh!" Harry laughed sarcastically, trying to sound as normal as possible "I think Gryffindor has about twenty points!"

Umbridge shook her head and smiled sadly "No, my boy, the more severe the infraction, the more severe the punishment. And...considering your toleration...perhaps someone else --- Someone close." She walked over and petted Susan's head affectionately.

"NOOOO!!" Harry screamed, but it was too late.

Susan had never felt such pain. Harry had described it to her ...more than once... But she couldn't even process what hurt, or how. She tried to do as her boyfriend had, but a scream tore from her throat.

Watching Susan writhe and twitch in agony was too much "STOP IT!!" he yelled.

"Ask, Mr. Potter..." the Headmistress ordered in a calm, disinterested tone "...quietly and politely."

Harry's hate flamed, but he buried it as best he could "Please...Headmistress...let Sue go."

"Much better." She praised him, happily "We'll make an obedient student of you yet. Finite!"

Susan whimpered and sobbed "I'm sor...ry...Just...not as ...strong as you."

"Let me go to her!" demanded Harry. "It's all right, Sue."

Umbridge returned to sit behind her desk before speaking again "Not just yet, Mr. Potter. There is still the matter of your group of miscreants. I want names."

"I-I c-c-can't." he stammered "i-i-I g-gave m-my w-ww-ord."

Well content with the situation, Umbridge smiled "I trust you remember the Winter Term, Mr. Potter. Let us go back to that. I give you three choices...Quill in hand, please... Now, you may either write the name of one of your fellow miscreants, or I Must Not Tell Lies. We shall continue this exercise until I have all names."

"Don't ...do it... Harry!" yelled Susan. She was still catching her breath.

Umbridge shook her head and fired again "Crucio!"

“STOP!” Harry screamed. Umbridge’s look quieted him. He lowered his eyes and added “Please, ma’am. I-I’ll d-do it.”

A wave of the wand and another “Finite” and Susan stopped screaming. Then Umbridge pointed to a spot just above her head and cast “Tiempo!” A fancy gold and fine wood clock appeared. It was numbered 1-10. “The rules are simple, boy.” She explained “Every time my clock hits ten, you will write. As I said ...either a name, or I Must Not Tell Lies. If not---“

“Alright! Alright!” Harry panicked, her wand was aimed at his girlfriend again “You made your point!”

Umbridge tapped her floating clock with her wand and said “Begin!” The single ornate hand swung around in a circle 1...2...3...4...5...6...7...8...9...10 and stopped, and dinged softly. “I’m waiting, Mr. Potter.”

“Fine.” Harry grumbled. He bit his tongue against the anticipated pain, and scratched on the parchment.

I Must Not Tell Lies

Umbridge leaned forward and grunted. The noise did not give any indication as to whether the Headmistress was pleased or not. She leaned back and tapped the clock again. The hand completed another circle ...9...10. This time she did not even speak, merely cocking an eyebrow at Harry.

Again, Harry wrote I Must Not Tell Lies

“Harry! Stop!” exclaimed Susan. Her voice betrayed no sign of the weakness that the pain had caused.

Harry, continuing to write, gritted out through clenched teeth “Stay-out-of-it!”

And so it went. Ten times became a hundred. A few inches of parchment became a foot. A foot became a yard. More and more parchment soaked up more and more of Harry’s blood. Minutes

became hours. Susan would alternately demand and plead for the Headmistress to stop, repeatedly offering to be Crucio'd in exchange for relief for her boyfriend. Harry would, at times, beg 'Please stay out of it' and at others harshly order Susan to 'Shut the bloody hell up!'

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More than once, the trio of Gryffindors outside Umbridge's office had tried --- and failed --- to break away from the Aurors and Draco Malfoy. Despite the screams and shouting they heard, Ron, Hermione and Neville silently agreed to wait. They assumed poses, not entirely acting, of defeat and waited.

There were a couple of additional opportunities over the next hour that Ron signaled a "No" on. But, finally, the 'bad guys' were more interested in the shouting from behind the door. Neville and Hermione had their attention on him, clearly anxious for nearly half an hour.

At Ron's nod, Hermione emitted a Banshee level screech and dropped. The two boys rushed the Aurors, knocking them over.

"I only have one wand!" yelled Hermione.

Ron pulled on her arm and shouted "No good! RUN!"

"They're ...not fol....lowing." Neville huffed and puffed. The DL Meetings had built him up quite a bit. But, the formerly chubby boy was still weak in endurance.

Ron nodded "Countin' on that. Umbitch told'em to stay outside. Malfoy better hope I never catch him alone! I'll kill him!"

"Later Ron!" Hermione snapped "We need help! Professor McGon---"

Ron cut her off angrily "You mean like she helped us with the bloody Stone! Forget it!"

"Ron we could use teachers help." Neville offered reasonably.

The red-head relented "You're right, if you can get it." He ordered "But don't take more than a few minutes. Gimme the wand and your DL coin. While you're at it, Professor Bones! GO!"

Hermione gave him a surprised look, then obeyed. She took off at a run.

Ron pressed the wand-tip into the coin. Umbridge's Office --- Now appeared on the face of the coin. Instantly every coin given to a DL Member would heat slightly. Ron knew some would be taking final exams, OWLs NEWTs or other years. Turning his chessmaster brain to it, he came up with a minimum of 15 that would go in. Devised and discarded a dozen attacks as too dangerous. He frowned when the best one he came up with still meant injuries and at least one death. He turned to his fellow Gryffindor and said "Right! Neville, you'll help me get everyone organized."

"Me?" asked Neville in a meek tone.

Ron laughed "Anyone that can stop me and Hermione from going at it --- You'll be fine."

"If you say so." Neville replied doubtfully.

What arrived was the entire Defense League, and several Professors. And the bulk of the rest of the students. Many, though, were probably just curiosity seekers who had just followed along.

"Right!" Ron hollered over the rumbling conversations "First of all, all you little kids clear out! Here's the story! Right now, Harry and Sue are being tortured by Umbridge! We're gonna rescue them!"

The Deputy Headmistress forced her way forward "All of you!" she yelled, overriding Ron "We Professors will handle thi---"

"If you're here to help, then SHUT UP!" Ron shouted her down "IF NOT --- GET LOST!!"

That silenced the entire crowd. No one had ever talked that way to Professor McGonagall before. In fact, the only two students that had ever publicly blasted a Professor were the ones in need of rescue.

“Ronald!” Professor Weasley shouted “That is absurd! You---”

Ron stamped his foot in frustration and aimed his wand “SHUT UP PERCY! SILENCIO! INCARCEROUS!!” The two rapid fire spells dropped a bound Professor Weasley to the ground.

“Some ruddy Defense teacher!” the Weasley twins exclaimed.

Ron’s face lit up at the sight of Fred and George “You got brooms!” he observed, excitedly “Great! Get outside! Blast out Umbridge’s window! As much noise as you can!”

“I should go, too, Ron.” Hermione volunteered “I have just the spell.”

Ron looked surprised, he knew Hermione didn’t care for flying. Even the broom that Harry got her for Christmas hadn’t coaxed her into the air. The Twins mounted their brooms and took to the air. Then they looped around as if they were one person and picked her up between them.

“I really hate flyiiiiinnng!!” Hermione’s rapidly fading voice could be heard.

McGonagall recovered her power of speech after the shock of being yelled at “Mr. Weasley!” she said sharply “Tell me, have you thought of the danger of what you are proposing?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Replied Ron, more quietly “Aurors are guarding her office. Someone’s gonna get hurt...maybe die. It’s why I’m going first. If anyo---”

McGonagall interrupted him “You most certainly are not, Mr. Weasley. Professors must protect students---”

“Ain’t done a good job of that.” Ron observed.

Anguish, rather than anger, appeared “Then it is time to correct that.” she replied.

“That’s my daughter!” Professor Bones declared “Don’t anybody try to stop me.”

“You can count me in.” tiny Professor Flitwick said. Professor Sinestra, the Head of Slytherin, also stepped forward. As did Sprout and Hagrid.

“And me!” came from the youngest person in the school.

In response, her mother shook her head vigorously “Absolutely not! Tina! Get yourself to the Great Hall and stay there!”

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The Aurors guarding Headmistress Umbridge’s office were all sitting around, resentful of the verbal tongue-lashing they had received from their superior. Dolohov, the leader, had bound and silenced the Malfoy brat for speaking out of turn. How dare he say he could have done a better job?

A blue light suddenly flashed across the corridor

“Go see what that was!” Dolohov ordered.

As two of them pulled their wands and obeyed, Professors Sprout and Sinestra turned frantically into the corridor yelling and screaming.

Another spell, this one green, impacted on a corner of masonry near the ceiling raining dust.

Professors Bones and McGonagall ran in next and the four women sought protection behind the Aurors. The Deputy Headmistress explained frantically “Students attacked us! They are revolting!”

Simultaneously, the befuddled Aurors heard an explosion that rattled everyone and Hagrid lumbered into the corridor. He grabbed the first

two Aurors, a man and a woman, by their throats and thrust them straight up into the stone ceiling.

The others, utterly unprepared, fell victim to the sobbing witches who suddenly struck. Joan, more violently than the others, kned hers in the groin. Though, that one turned out to be a woman, it was just as effective.

Professor Flitwick, who had helped Hermione perfect her technique, yelled his favorite spell "Bombarda!" and the heavy wood door to Umbridge's office exploded. Wood flew in all directions.

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Meanwhile, Fred George and Hermione, after the dust cleared, flew through the gaping hole their combined Bombardas had blown out. They slammed, bodily, into the Headmistress. Then the Twins pulled her to her feet and backed her into a wall, wands dug into her throat.

"Well done, boys!" exclaimed Professors Bones, who was the first one through to shattered door. She had the half-conscious Dolohov by his long stringy hair and drove him head first into the wall beside Umbridge.

"THAT HURT BITCH!!" the wounded Auror roared.

George's elbow lashed out and struck his temple "Show respect for a lady!" he snarled.

"Why, thank you Mr. Weasley." Joan said lightly. She then turned to Hermione "I've got her. You check Harry. Finite Incantatum!"

Susan groaned painfully and her muscles refused to obey her will "I'm...al...right" she huffed "How's Harry?"

"I have never seen him so pale." Hermione commented as she gently lifted his head and laid him in the chair "Not even after the Dursley incident last year."



Susan forced herself up “She wanted our names.” She explained “(uhhnnnn)... Threatened to crucio me unless Harry wrote them ...Made him use---Blood Quill---“ Susan sagged back in the chair.

“My God.” Hermione gasped at the sight of the huge scroll she found “Pages and pages of I Must Not Tell Lies And! Look at his hand.”

Carved deeply into the back of Harry’s right hand was I Must Not Tell Lies The wound was so deep Hermione could see muscles, tendons and bone. She immediately tore off her shirt sleeve and wrapped it around the hand.

Fortunately, Madam Pomfrey the school Medi-Witch arrived then. “We must get him to the Hospital Wing at once.” She ordered “Lucky I thought to bring Blood Replenisher. But, he will need more. A lot more. More than I have on hand.”

“I shall start brewing more at once, Poppy” Susan’s mother said.

Madam Pomfrey nodded “Quickly, Joan. I will use what I have. And will probably have to fill the gap with transfusions. Rubeus, carry Mr. Potter, please...as gently as possible, but quickly.”

“Course” said Hagrid “Poor boy. First ‘is po’ owl killed. No’this.”

A score of voices in the corridor yelling “DROP YOUR WANDS!!”

“Now!” Umbridge ordered sharply. She and Dolohov took advantage of the distraction. They pushed free of Fred and George and grabbed their confiscated wands off her desk. Umbridge also snatched up the heavy roll of parchment that Harry had written on. Then, the pair Disapparated.

Hermione exclaimed “You can’t do that in Hogwarts!!”

“They’re at the other tower!” Susan yelled. She seized her mother’s wand and, for the second time in her life, cast “Avada Kedavra!” at humans. And her aim, thanks to the Defense League, was dead on. But Umbridge and Dolohov flew off on brooms a fraction of a second

before it hit. Drained of her last reserve of magic, Susan slumped into unconsciousness.

The very mismatched pair of Aurors, Tonks and Mad-Eye Moody, had entered the room just as Umbridge and Dolohov Disapparated. At their 'all clear' nods Amelia Bones entered. She saw her niece fire off the Killing Curse. She said quietly "I did not see anything. Did anyone else?"

"Whatever do you mean, Director?" asked Tonks.

Moody pulled a fallen Fred to his feet "Sorry, Amelia. I was helping young Mr. Weasley here."

"My daughter needs immediate attention." Joan said "And I have a great deal of work to do. Good to see you again, Ami."

Director Bones embraced her sister-in-law briefly and said "You, too. I only wish we had arrived sooner. Teachers and students should not have had to fight our battle."

"We did what we had to, Ami." replied Joan, tiredly "If anyone's to blame it's ---YOU!!"

Albus Dumbledore had walked in at that moment, shaking his head sadly. His train of thought was totally disrupted by the angry shout. Eyebrows nearly leaving his forehead, he began "Joan, do calm yourself. I understand how you feel. But---"

"Don't patronize me!" she lashed out "Harry was right about you!! Where the bleeding hell were you while children were being tortured?! You Headmaster (she spat out the word like a curse) are a stinking coward!! RICTUSEMPRA!!"

It was so completely unexpected that Dumbledore face didn't even have time to change expression. He flew across Umbridge's former office and slammed into the far wall. Moody snatched Joan's wand from her and he and Tonks held her arms.

"Joan!" Amelia said sharply "Follow Susan to the Hospital Wing!"

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Hours later, Harry woke up. One arm, he felt, was immobile. He yanked on the muscle with no success.

“Morning.” said Hannah Abbott “Come on, Harry, I heard your arm twitch. Don’t worry...no more Umbitch.”

Harry grinned and obeyed. The first thing he asked was “What happened? Where’s Sue?”

“Hello Hannah! Good morning to you, too!” the blond Hufflepuff said, airily “Oh, just fine, Harry! Thanks for asking!”

Harry grunted “Sorry.”

“I really shouldn’t be teasing the wounded.” Hannah commented “Right. Just lie still. And no moving that arm. There is a very large needle in it. I’ll be right back.”

Taking stock of things, Harry felt alright physically. His right arm was the one Hannah referred to. And, straight out of the Muggle world, was a major needle protruding from just about the middle of it. His right hand was also heavily bandaged. His missing glasses meant he could hardly see, but he didn’t need them to recognize the approaching footsteps “Hey, Madam Pomfrey!” he greeted the school Medi-Witch, cheerfully. “Long time no see!”

“Potter, Potter, Potter” she clucked “Here are your glasses. Very well, you know the routine.”

Using only his left hand, Harry flicked open his glasses and put them on. He scanned the room seeking his girlfriend “Where’s Susan?” he asked.

“Asleep, on my orders.” the Medi-Witch replied shortly “Though I am certain Miss Abbott is correcting that as we speak.”

By the time he saw a flash of bright red hair, Harry was all poked and prodded out "I thought Healers had diagnostic spells." He complained, deliberately bating her.

"Hmph!" Pomfrey grunted and finished up. She flicked the bedsheet over her patient's head. At the line of 'invaders' she snapped "Out! The lot of you!"

Only Susan, Ron, Hermione and Hannah were allowed to pass.

"Alright there, mate?" asked Ron.

Susan walked around the bed and sat on it. "I'm glad you're alright, Harry." She said tenderly. She leaned over and kissed him softly. "We are going to have a fight about you yelling at me, though. But, later."

"Wouldn't worry too much" Ron commented, dryly "think she just wants to fight to make up."

All three girls glared at him. Harry laughed weakly, then studying his friend asked "What happened to your eye?"

"Nothing serious." Ron replied. He was sporting a swollen and black and blue right eye "One of Umbridge's little army got in a cheap shot. It's driving my Mother crazy, so I decided to keep it."

Harry just shrugged "So, what happened?"

"It's a long story, Harry." Hermione said.

For now, happy to be surrounded by the people he cared about the most, Harry smiled and said "Well, we have plenty of time. I ain't going anywhere."

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Far away from Hogwarts, Lord Voldemort smiled. Months of frustration were finally over. "The time has come my loyal followers." He said. "In this one night, we will double our numbers, humiliate the

Ministry while obtaining The Prophecy. And, unless I am mistaken, eliminate The-Boy-Who-Lived.”

“My Lord” one masked figure began

Lord Voldemort held up a skeletal hand and commanded “Silence! At last! I can access the boy’s mind again!” He slipped into a trance, his mental voice almost kind he said “Hello again, Harry Potter.”

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“We shall meet your master when I have prepared certain precautions.” Delores Umbridge sneered.

Dolohov glared down at the diminutive witch. Alone, he no longer had to act subservient “Tonight is crucial to the Dark Lord’s plans!” the Auror growled impatiently “I must be there!”

“When I am ready!” she snapped back. With her wand, Umbridge ignited a fire under a size four cauldron. Aquamenti! And it filled with water.

Annoyed, Dolohov growled “Where are we? I can’t Apparate!”

“Of course you can’t! This cave is my private retreat and under a Fidelius.” Umbridge countered. “Now, make yourself useful and grind up this Goblin’s foot while I slice up bat wings!”

After twenty minutes and unpleasant odor filled the cave. The large, floor mounted, cauldron was steaming and the mixture was purplish in color.

“What exactly are you brewing?!” demanded Dolohov.

Umbridge dipped a spoon into the bubbling liquid and tasted it. “And now for the final ingredients.” She said. Then, breaking apart the scroll Harry had written on and crumpling the paper she added it to the mixture. Then looking at her compatriot ordered “Slice my hand.”

“What?” he asked.

Umbridge rolled her eyes “Seemed a simple enough order!” she said sharply and stuck out her palm. Not even wincing as the blade bit into her flesh the exiled Headmistress of Hogwarts allowed a stream of her own blood to flow into the cauldron.”

“Are you ready yet?” Dolohov complained ten minutes later.

Umbridge had downed a pint of her mysterious potion and stored the rest in tablespoon quantities. The last thing she did was pour some into a large diamond amulet which she then put on a necklace. “Now I am prepared.” She announced.

First the pair, under Umbridge’s control, Apparated from her cave to a wooded area. Then, under Dolohov’s control, to an imposing mansion. Dolohov spoke with awe, somehow capitalizing words as he did “I will escort you to Him. Surely the Dark Lord will welcome you into His service.”

“My goals are more ambitious than that.” Umbridge replied coldly “Proceed.”

Entering what had become a throne room Dolohov knelt and awaited his Master’s pleasure “Kneel!” he commanded his charge.

“I think not.” Umbridge replied, ignoring all the other Death Eaters in the room and looking directly into the open, but vacant, eyes of the feared Dark Lord. “Well, Mr. Riddle, it has been a long time.”

Voldemort abruptly came out of his trance “I lost my connection to the boy!” he growled “Crucio!”

“Myyyy....Looooorrrd!!” Dolohov wailed in agony.

“Welcome Delores.” Voldemort said in polite tones. He even bowed “Oh, my apologies. That would be Madam Undersecretary.”

Umbridge scowled “Do not presume to patronize me, Riddle.”

The assembled Death Eaters gasped at the lack of respect shown for their Master in His Throne Room.

“I had thought you would make a useful addition.” Voldemort said evilly “But I have no time for disrespectful servants.”

“Hem! Hem!” she coughed, as if about to lecture a bunch of students, “Nor do I have any intention of being one of your sycophants. You and I merely have mutual interests at the moment.”

Voldemort turned his back, disdainfully and ordered “Wormtail, kill her!”

“Avada Kedavra!” the rat-faced Death Eater yelled.

## 36 – Department of Mysteries

Peter Pettigrew wasn't half the wizard of most people. In subjects where studying was the key, he had excelled in school. He NEWTed in Potions, Herbology and History of Magic. In Defense, Transfiguration and Charms, where skill and power were the deciding factors, Peter fell behind his best friends. That drove him to jealousy, which eventually drove him to Voldemort.

He defended himself in the Dark Lord's inner circle in three ways. The Cringe worked wonders, more powerful wizards underestimated him completely. The second was that he endlessly cast the Killing Curse until it was effortless. Peter had killed more than one Death Eater, never mind the thirteen Muggles. And, finally, he could hit a bulls-eye a hundred times out of a hundred.

Some of the assembled Death Eaters were mildly surprised that the weak wizard could even cast the spell. Shock filled the room when the spell hit its victim and she did not fall. Instead, the Killing Curse rebounded.

Peter Pettigrew (aka Wormtail) howled in agony as his body was literally torn apart. Skin shredded and fell off in long strips. Then caught fire. Bones exploded, spraying white powder everywhere. And the whole bloody mass, with no support, flopped to the floor and was consumed by the flames. The whole grisly affair took several minutes during which no one spoke or moved. When the fire had burned itself out, all that was left was some jelly-like residue and ashes.

"That hurt rather more than I anticipated." Umbridge commented. Her voice was shaky and she had fallen to her knees as a result.

But, the witch was still very much alive. The masked figures about the room had witnessed the impossible. Not one of them dared pull out their wands.

"Is that fear I sense?" Voldemort asked, coldly "From you, my greatest friends. Very well! All of you out! Madam Undersecretary, I am willing to discuss mutual interests." Behind the casual words were multiple questions the Dark Lord would have to work out over time.



Voldemort did not often have need for patience, but the manner of Wormtail's death alarmed him. Not for the dead man's sake, naturally. Only as it pertained to Voldemort himself.

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The morning following the rescue, and Madam Bones' and Dumbledore's seizure of Hogwarts, Harry was up very early. Lonely and bored. The Muggle-style blood transfusion and Magical Blood replenishing potions had done their work. His horrible paleness was gone and his formerly almost transparent skin had resumed its normal appearance.

"Ahh...morning Harry!" the airy voice of Luna Lovegood interrupted Harry's boredom.

He smiled at the skipping blond girl as she approached his bed "What brings you here at ... what is it? ....4am?"

"4:22, actually." She replied "Just running my paper route. Here is your paper, Mr. Potter."

Harry's smile widened. Luna just had a way of doing that "Why, thank you Miss Lovegood." He replied in the same tone "And, I'm sorry, but these Hospital pajamas don't let me have any money."

"Quite alright." said Luna "You can catch me up later. Have a good day."

Harry watched her skip out of the Hospital Wing until she was out of sight, then shook his head bemusedly. It was the one way he liked her better than Hermione or Susan. When they saw something troubling him, they would keep pushing, until he talked about whatever it was. Luna could also, obviously, read him too. But she didn't even need to be told to buzz off. He glanced at the bundled paper she dumped in his lap and wondered aloud "So, what's news?"

**COUP! FUDGE OUT! SCRIMGEOUR INTERIM MINISTER**

By Helena Lovegood Greengrass

Last night, Aurors led by Alastor (Mad-Eye) Moody and Rufus Scrimgeour stormed the Ministry of Magic. Forces loyal to the Fudge Government fought the rebels for several hours. But, ultimately, numbers decided the matter. Coup leaders state their forces outnumbered Fudge's by four to one. Casualties were five dead, nineteen injured. No names have been released. Minister Fudge and an unnamed Auror are missing.

Also, The Auror Academy was seized. There are no more details available, official or otherwise.

Reliable eyewitnesses also confirm a force of Aurors, led by MLE Director Amelia Bones and former Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, attacked Hogwarts. Events there are confusing. The attack was apparently aimed at removing Headmistress and Senior Undersecretary Delores Umbridge and the force of Aurors under her personal authority.

Fighting, however, had already broken out in the school. The circumstances are officially 'Under Investigation' What is known is that five of the ten Aurors under Umbridge's command are in custody. Umbridge herself and one Auror were seen fleeing the school on brooms.

A statement signed by Deputy Headmistress McGonagall and Medi-Witch Pomfrey received by The Quibbler states there was NO LOSS OF LIFE among Aurors, Professors or Students.

Percival Weasley, Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts was stunned in the fighting. And Herbology Professor Sprout suffered a broken knee.

Names of injured students are being withheld to allow families to be notified.

The new Minister, Rufus Scrimgeour, will be speaking tonight on Wizing Wireless at 6PM. The speech will be rebroadcast at 7:30 and midnight. Scrimgeour, 52, entered the Auror Academy straight out of Hogwarts where he topped his class in Potions and Magical

Law and Government. He graduated 9th in a class of thirty-seven. An Auror for nearly 30 years, he had been Amelia Bones' Assistant Director for almost four years.

In related news, a Wizengamot resolution, passed by acclamation, asked Hogwarts Board of Governors to reinstate Albus Dumbledore to his long-held post as Headmaster. Bones, in her role as Speaker, introduced the legislation and spoke in favor of it.

Harry had stared at the byline for several seconds before being able to move on. He would have to ask Daphne, Luna, or both, about that. His spirits sank at people having actually died, but was glad to see Fudge out of power. He didn't know anything about this Scrimgeour guy, but figured he must be OK to work for his girlfriend's aunt. Soon, though, Harry felt drained. His head rolled back and he drifted off. Almost instantly, he was dreaming.

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Someone patted Harry on the shoulder. It was Ron all dressed up "Not thinking of backing out, are ya, mate?" he asked.

"Huh?" asked Harry.

A look of concern appeared on his face "Seriously, Harry" said Ron "The wedding ... the ring ... your fiancée walking down the aisle ... any of this sound familiar?"

"I'm --- getting married?"

"Duh!" Ron replied "And your parents would be kinda ticked after all the money they spent."

Harry's eyes bugged out and he asked "My parents?" His eyes followed his friend's gaze. And there, in living flesh, sitting in the front row were James and Lily Potter. Both looked older than in the pictures Harry remembered seeing. His Dad winked at him and gave a thumbs up. His Mum poked James in the ribs and blew her son a kiss. Then, his Dad gave a girlish wave and blew a kiss. Sirius, on the other side of James, imitated his best friend.

The sound of a blown nose drew Harry's attention to the other side of the aisle where Joan Bones sat. And, actually, it was Amelia who was crying. Harry laughed slightly, then covered it with a cough.

Harry looked around, taking in the perfectly decorated altar that perfectly blended Gryffindor and Hufflepuff colors. Next to Ron was Susan's brother, Frank, who was as imposing as ever. Next to Frank was a young boy who strongly resembled Lily, except for the jet-black hair that matched Harry's. The wedding march started and Harry stiffened, his eyes riveted to the back of the church.

First down, was a little red-haired girl. She scattered petals here and there as she walked. When she reached the altar she ran up to Harry and wrapped her arms around his legs "I'm so happy for you big brother!" she said.

Harry picked her up and kissed her cheek.

"Have some flowers!" she announced, mischievously, and dumped the last handful over his head. Then, she ran to sit between Lily and James.

Looking absolutely breathtaking, Hermione walked down next. Harry winked at her when she took her place on the altar. But, Hermione held her face precisely still. Harry, however, saw the amusement in her eyes. Susan's sister, Tina, followed next. Though still a kid, the bridesmaid's robes revealed hints that the blond girl would develop a figure as impressive as her sister and mother. Hannah Abbott, the Maid of Honor, walked down last. Harry heard a strangled noise coming from Ron and smirked.

The Bridal March started. Neil Bones appeared, and a moment later, Susan. Wearing heels and with her hair done up, the bride was as tall as her father. The traditional veil did nothing to hide her radiant smile.

Harry only had eyes for her. His hand trembled slightly when her father offered Susan's hand to him. He watched as Susan's father lifted her veil, kissed her forehead and both cheeks. Unshed tears of joy shone in Harry's eyes ---

--- Abruptly, the wedding music from the organ turned into a foul screeching. Susan's hand, in his, lengthened and changed to a sickly blue-green color. The smiling father of the bride morphed into the insane visage of Barty Crouch Jr. Ron turned into Peter Pettigrew. And Susan, she tore the bridal robes from her body and suddenly stood a foot taller.

"I have missed our nightly chats, Harry." Voldemort's voice came from Susan's lips. "I thought you loved me."

Harry screamed incoherently and tried to pull away. He looked around for help, but all of the wedding guests were now faceless Death Eaters. Except for his family and Sirius. They were also no longer in the church, but in the Ministry. Harry recognized it as the place where Mr. Weasley had been attacked by the snake.

"Avada Kedavra!" Voldemort/Susan yelled. And James, Lily and the little girl all slumped bonelessly to the floor.

"NOOOOOOOO!!!" Harry screamed. He tore at the hand holding his to no avail.

Wand pointed at Sirius Voldemort/Susan yelled "Crucio!"

"AHHHH!!!" Sirius wailed, in agony "Harry! Help me!! We're in the Department of Mysteries!!"

Again Voldemort/Susan yelled "Crucio!"

"Help me, Harry!!" cried Sirius. He'd been reduced to a quivering mass.

Susan's face vanished and Voldemort's appeared, but Sirius' voice came out, mockingly "Help me, Harry. Save me, Harry. Help me, Harry."

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The dream turned nightmare exploded and Harry woke up still in his hospital bed. In a panic, he tried to jump out of bed, but his right arm was still magically bolted to the bed. He grabbed his wand and cast "Finite Incantatum!" It did not work. Fueled by adrenaline, Harry pulled the whole thing apart and rushed out of the Hospital Wing.

"Hiya, Harry." Susan said brightly. She was leading a group of visitors coming to see her boyfriend. It only took a look at his face to realize something was wrong. "What is it?"

He only half saw her. "Gotta save Sirius!" he snapped.

"Hang about." Susan ordered "Just how do you know he's in danger."

Harry kept walking, forcing the entire party to turn around and answered shortly "Voldemort told me."

"How?" asked Hermione, logically. "We thought...after Nicolas Flamel's visit, that is...you could block him out totally."

Harry looked at her angrily and growled "Well he got through!"

"You-Know-Who is a master of deceit and trickery." Luna commented, without her usual air of unusualness.

Rushing along beside her, Neville picked up on his girlfriend's thought "Yeah, Harry" he said "Slow down and think. It's probably a trap. Bet'cha he's not even there."

"Ya think?" asked Harry. He actually slowed his pace.

Hermione added "It's not hard to check. Just floo."

"Makes sense." admitted Harry. "Right, nearest fireplace is in Gryffindor." He was still tense, but not panicky as they made their way to the Common Room. Harry burst in, pointed his wand at the fireplace and cast "Incendio!" And he took a pinch of Floo Powder and called for his Godfather.

Instead of Sirius, the face of his ancient House-Elf Kreacher appeared “What does Mudblood boy want?” he asked.

“Got half a mind to smack you one!” growled Ron.

The House-Elf sneered at him “Kreacher not afraid of Blood Traitor boy!”

“Stop Ron!” Harry ordered, then, he turned back to the fire “Kreacher, forget about him! Where is Sirius?”

Kreacher sniffed indignantly and said “Traitor master does not tell Kreacher everything!”

“Please, Kreacher” Hermione said softly “It is very important that we speak to Sirius.”

Kreacher was worse with her “You is true Mudblood! Mistress hates Mudbloods!”

“I am no Mudblood, Kreacher! And you will not use that word again! I am Sirius Black’s Godson!” Harry declared “And as such, your master in his absence! I ORDER YOU TO ANSWER ME! WHERE IS SIRIUS!?”

Shock washed over the elf’s features. The unwilling words spilled out “Master went to the Ministry!”

“That’s it then.” said Harry “I need to get to the Ministry fast!”

Ron stopped him “No way, mate. That’s a we.”

“Uh-uh. I can’t ask you to---” Harry started.

He was cut off by Hermione “Grammar aside, I agree with Ron. And you didn’t ask.”

“Never met a Dark Lord, before.” Luna offered “Sounds like an adventure.” Neville put a hand on her shoulder and nodded, he looked quite grim.

“Brooms ---“ Ron said, suddenly “brooms would be fastest since we can’t Apparate. I’ll get mine and the twins.”

Nodding, Harry took off at a sprint and yelled back “I’ll get mine! DAMN! I WISH MY STUFF WAS STILL HERE!!” Susan and Hannah looked at each other and followed.

“FRONT GATE!!! FIVE MINUTES!!!” Ron bellowed.

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After getting his broom from his dorm in Hufflepuff, Harry raced through the school on it. He dodged and weaved to avoid collisions, even spending much of the time riding upside down along the ceiling. He ignored the demands of a number of professors that he stop. Hannah and Susan followed at a ‘sane’ rate.

At the gate were Ron, Hermione, Luna, Neville and Ginny. “We have a problem.” Ron declared “These Comets will never keep up with Firebolts. Never mind Harry’s LX.”

“What’s she doing here?” asked Susan. There was no love lost between the two redheads.

With a hard glare, Ginny replied “If Sirius needs help then... I’m there. I heard every word.”

“It’s too dangerous, Gin!” exclaimed Ron.

Neville got between the arguing siblings and said “We don’t have time! And, Ron, she’s as good as any of us...’Cept Harry.”

“Uhh...guys...we got company!” Hannah yelled over them. It was in the form of several professors.

Ron snatched Harry’s broom from him and shoved his at him “And, you ain’t outrunning us either!” he announced and took off. Hermione cried out and launched herself. Cursing Ron, Harry mounted, he had planned to do exactly that.



A Petrificus spell, aimed at Harry, was intercepted by Susan who threw herself in the path of it and fell, stiff as a board. Already gaining altitude, Harry hadn't seen it happen. Hannah, however, did. She cast her broom aside and went to her friend.

Luna and Ginny had been holding Comets. The two girls grabbed the discarded Firebolts and took to the air, followed by Neville.

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On the ground, Hannah had cancelled the spell on her fellow Hufflepuff and was helping Susan to her feet "How many kinds of an idiot throws themselves in front of a spell!?" she protested "You didn't even know what it was!!"

"I wasn't thinking, alright. I just reacted." Susan replied "But I'm right pissed at whoever threw it!"

Rushing up was Joan Bones "That would be me, young lady!" she declared "I trust you have an explanation for this performance!"

"Not now, Mother!" Susan snapped back at her "Right now, I need to contact Aunt Ami! There's going to be an attack on the Ministry!"

The running girl had made it as far as the main gate, where the restored Headmaster was. "Now, Miss Bones, calm down. Would you please explain how you could know this?" asked Dumbledore.

"Because Harry told us!" exclaimed Susan "Now get outta my way!"

Unhurriedly, Dumbledore shook his head and said "If only Harry had done as I asked and continued the Occulumency lessons with Pr---"

"You even use the word Snape and I'll hex your beard off!!" Susan screamed.

That was when her little sister yelled "Run Suzy!" And she cast a banishing spell on a Weasley Stink Bomb. It hit Dumbledore in the cheek and exploded.

“Nice, Tina.” Susan complemented. She ducked under the expanding cloud of foul odor and ran off.

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After a twenty minute broom flight, with Harry pushing ever and ever harder for just one more MPH, the group forced its way into the Ministry. Though never actually there himself, he unfalteringly led the way to the Department of Ministries. He instantly recognized the long rows of shelves that held glowing balls, but the vast room was silent. “WELL! I’M HERE!!” Harry called out. His voice echoed as it bounced off the walls.

“I don’t like this.” commented Hermione “I don’t like this at all.”

Ginny and Ron looked at each other and, in the same breath, said “I got a bad feeling about this.”

“Heheeheehee!” a woman’s voice cackled “Look who we have! It’s the famous Boy-Who-Lived! And he’s brought some playmates!”

Several streams of smoke buzzed around the teens then took form. Four Death Eaters appeared.

“It’s a trap!” cried Harry.

One of them, a male by the voice, spoke sharply “Kill the others! Our Master wants Potter for himself!”

“Crucio!” the woman yelled.

Neville cried out and collapsed, jerking and twitching in pain.

“Diffindo!” Ginny cast.

The Death Eater dodged, smoothly and commented casually “Rather powerful for a little girl. But what would you expect from a Pureblood line.”

“Get away from my sister!” Ron snarled “Incarcerous!” His spell was well aimed, but struck a shield.

Luna, meanwhile, had released Neville from the Cruciatus and was helping him up.

“Expelliarmus!” yelled Harry. The spell struck two of the masked figures, blowing the both far down between the shelves. “RUN!” The teens headed for the door, only to have it slammed shut.

Hermione pointed her wand and cast “Alohamora!”

“Foolish Mudblood!” the woman’s voice taunted.

Harry spun around and pointed to his left “That way!” Mocking laughter followed them. The teens raced down one aisle. Turned up another and ran headlong into another Death Eater. They exchanged spells and headed another way.

“Stop! Stop! Stop!” Ron finally ordered “They’re herding us! Trying to get us to a specific spot!”

Hermione nodded in agreement, looking at something “And I think we’re there.” She said, ominously. A faintly glowing ball had a label under it that read:

S. P. T. to A. P. W. B. D. re Dark Lord and (?) Harry Potter

“My name?” asked Harry. He started to reach for it.

Ginny grabbed his hand and pushed it away. “That’s not a good idea.” She said.

“Didn’t ask your opinion!” Harry growled at her.

Ron agreed with his sister, saying “She’s right Harry. I think they wanted us to find it.”

Unfortunately it was too late. Harry had grabbed the ball. It hardly weighed anything. But, it seemed oddly important. "So, what do I do with it?" he asked

"I dunno." replied Hermione. The other teens just closed around him and stared at the small ball. They were so engrossed by it that they didn't watch their backs.

"Well done Potter." The cool tones of a Death Eater declared "Ah...ahh...ahh careful with those wands."

The high-pitched cackling witch added "Yes indeed (hehehe) children must be careful with their toys."

"Where is Sirius?" demanded Harry. He held the ball tighter to his body.

The Death Eater stretched out his hand and said "Hand it over and we'll take you to him."

"NO!" argued Harry "Take me to Sirius!"

The Death Eater repeated his demand "Hand it over and we'll take you to him."

"You're Lucius Malfoy." Luna declared, suddenly.

Chuckling softly and lifting his mask, he replied "Well, you may be as crazy as your father. But, obviously, you are clever. Pity you won't live to tell anyone."

"Touch her and I kill you!" Neville declared. He pushed Luna behind him protectively.

Again, there was high-pitched cackling "Well, Well, Well such a brave soul. And who are you, boy?"

"Why, Bella dear, how negligent of you." Malfoy said, lazily "Are you telling me you don't remember your favorite victims?"

Revealing an insane countenance and shabby hair, the witch pulled off her mask and laughed girlishly “Don’t tell me this is a Longbottom.” She said “Oh, dear, that is sweet Alice’s face!”

“What’s so important about this Prophecy?” asked Harry “Why’s Voldemort want it?”

Now there were half a dozen Death Eaters trapping the teens. They all gasped. Bellatrix Lestrange spoke in a whisper “You dare speak His name?”

“Yeah, big deal, Voldemort.” Harry scoffed “Nothing to be afraid of since I beat him as a baby.”

Bellatrix flew into a rage “Dirty half-blood!” she screeched “Unfit to speak His name!! How dare you mock Him!!”

“NO!” Malfoy commanded. He shoved Bella’s hand causing her spell to go wide. “You heard our instructions!”

Ron fired a stinging hex at one of the still masked figures and ran. “They want the Prophecy!” he yelled “They can’t endanger it! Harry! Throw it! Everyone scatter!”

“STUPEFY!” yelled Malfoy, which hit Neville solidly, making it impossible for him to cast spells. Two of the masked Death Eaters fired Imperio’s which Ginny and Harry dodged.

Hermione fired an Incarcerous at Bellatrix, which caught the witch on her legs. “Yes!” she celebrated.

“Finite!” cast Malfoy, “Shame on you, Bella. Letting a Mudblood catch you.”

The battle turned into both sides silently stalking each other. Two Death Eaters hexed each other when, having trapped Ron in an aisle, they both fired spells. Ron pointed his wand at his feet and cast Winguardium Leviosa launching himself to the ceiling and out of the line of fire. He saw Neville and threw the Prophecy ball to him.

“Finite!” Luna cast, when she found her boyfriend, enabling him to talk again.

Neville pulled her into an aisle and whispered “Luna, I want you out of here!”

“As long as you’re here I’m here!” she hissed back.

Bella’s voice echoed in the vast room “Enough of this! All of you come out or the Mudblood dies!!”

“Ron, give them the thing!” Harry called out.

From his hiding spot, Ron called out “I don’t have it.”

“I do!” yelled Neville “Don’t hurt her!”

Bellatrix cackled “Ahh...chivalry. Come out brave Longbottom! I’ll send you to your dear Mummy and Daddy!”

“YOU TORTURED THEM!!” Neville bellowed. He rushed out of hiding and charged. In his rush, he bobbed the Prophecy sphere and tripped over his robes. He lost control of both his wand and the sphere. Both crunched on the marble floor. The wand cracked and the sphere shattered.

Bellatrix screeched in fury, threw Hermione against a shelf and yelled “CRUCIO!”

Hermione screamed in agony and fell.

“Stop please!” Harry called out. “I’ll give up! Let everyone else---”

Ginny came out from hiding, pointed her wand at Bella and screamed “DIFFINDO!!”

“YAAAAHHHHH!!” the female Death Eater yelled at the force of the impact. Her body crashed through half a dozen rows of shelves then slumped down against a wall.

“SECTUSEMPRA! EXPELLIARMUS!” were fired in rapid succession, disrupting the entire line of Death Eaters.

Two loud cracks announced another pair of arrivals. They launched Killing Curses causing everyone to dive for cover. “Come out Harry Potter.” The taller and leaner one said silkily “We have not seen each other in a year.”

“WHERE’S SIRIUS!?” Harry roared.

The shorter, and rather rotund, other whispered something.

“Rumor has it you were naughty in school this year.” Voldemort said, mockingly “Really, what would dear James and Lily say?”

Harry’s gut twisted “YOU AIN’T FIT TO SPEAK THEIR NAMES!” he cried. Forsaking his wand, Harry charged and physically assaulted the Dark Lord.

“Imperio!” Voldemort managed to get his wand between them and cast the controlling spell. “Call your friends, Harry. Tell them it’s safe to come out.”

Harry felt euphoric, he smiled and obeyed “Luna! Neville! Ron! Gi---” Abruptly, he cut himself off. Something was wrong, then it clicked “STAY DOWN! DON’T DO ANYTHING I SAY!!” He clutched at his head as white hot pokers of pain lanced through his mind.

“Obey me!” Voldemort demanded. Potter’s resistance was surprising. And, something he did not have time for. But, there was information he had to have and only the boy possessed it.

Interrupting the mental confrontation, the hall door exploded.

Voldemort’s disguised companion fired a Killing Curse at the door. Now all that was known was that it was a female. One figure, the first through the door, glowed green for a moment, fell and did not rise.

“HOLD ON HARRY! I’M HERE!” Sirius Black yelled and started to charge. Only to be yanked back as another curse impacted.

The Auror pushed Sirius against the wall and growled "Don't be stupid!"

"That's my Godson in there, Rob!" Sirius shot back, pushing the man off him.

Even more fiercely, the Auror countered "And that's my kid sister laying there DEAD! Now, we do this by the numbers! Or I'll stun you myself!"

"Mate, I'm so sorry." Sirius looked stricken.

Rob's face became an emotionless mask "Save it for later." He ordered "Now, I'll go first. You cover me."

"No way." Sirius countered "If anyone goes first---"

Rob gave him a shove and screamed over the battle sounds "This ain't a bloody tournament! You get hit without armor, you're dead! Now, make yourself useful and cover me!"

"Luck, Rob." Sirius wished him, and finally nodded in agreement. He disliked letting someone else run the risk, but the armored man was better equipped. Then he, and Auror Sharpe went through.

"Fight back!" came the harsh command to the Death Eaters. "One Auror! A broken weakling! And a bunch of children! PATHETIC!" The fact that Voldemort was not even able to dominate a single boy did not factor into the scathing evaluation.

What had started as a standoff, became a running battle. Though individually more powerful, the Death Eaters were outnumbered. Being held to a draw by Harry and his friends, the addition of the two men tilted the balance. The combatants moved out of the Prophecy Hall and into an almost empty room. All it contained was an ornate doorway. Oddly, the door was in the center of the room.

A Killing Curse, fired by Voldemort's masked ally, was aimed right at Sirius. But, a split second before it hit, the Auror tackled him. The



unlucky part was that both men's wands bounced out of their hands and clattered on the mable floor.

The Dark Lord had little choice but to follow his minions, releasing his grip on Harry's mind.

The adults were in a constant state of Apparition. Since the room offered no cover, it was the best way to avoid spells. The teens constantly twisted this way and that, on guard for an attack. A wisp of smoke appeared near Ginny and solidified. She was disarmed and seized by the throat.

"Stop or she dies!" Bellatrix cried out.

Dazed and shaky, Harry had stumbled along behind the combatants. He saw everyone solidify and hold their positions. No one, however, was looking his way. He aimed his wand carefully and was about to fire a spell when a crack and flash of light filled the room and momentarily blinded him.

"LEAVE HER ALONE!" Rubeus Hagrid roared. He grabbed Bellatrix by the throat and threw her across the room. The evil witch skidded to a halt amidst torn robes. Then, the giant plucked Ginny off her feet and ran.

The other arrival was Albus Dumbledore. Shaking his head, Dumbledore took to lecturing "Tom, Tom, Tom. My greatest student...and greatest --- disappointment. You should not have come here. Aurors are com---"

"By which time you will be long dead, Old Man!" Voldemort declared, venomously. He fired a Killing Curse, but missed.

Dumbledore had moved out of the way and countered with a curse that sizzled the air as it went. It impacted on a shield Voldemort had conjured. As if discussing the weather, he said "Surrender, Tom. You will have to pay for your crimes. But, I will help you redeem yourself."

Everyone was transfixed by the confrontation they were witnessing.

“YOU GOTTA BE SHITTING ME!!” cried Harry. He could not believe that Dumbledore was actually expecting Voldemort to give up, apologize and be forgiven. He lashed out “AVADA KEDAVRA!”

A casual flick of the Dark Lord’s wand sent a stone into the path of the spell. He laughed softly “Well done, boy. Now, do it again. For me! IMPERIO!”

“NO!” protested Harry. But, weakened by the first assault, his mental shields were not up to the task of defended him again. His wand slowly trained on the Headmaster and he fired again.

Much to Voldemort’s displeasure, the spell burned a hole in the floor two feet in front of Harry. Unwilling to use a Killing Curse again on him, Voldemort yelled “Expelliarmus!”

“Harry!” Sirius cried out and ran to the stricken boy’s aid. Hermione got there about the same time and, between, propped Harry up against the wall.

Even before the spell hit Harry, Voldemort redirected his wand and fired a Killing Curse at Dumbledore.

The aged wizard moved with surprising speed and struck back as he dodged. Soon, they were a blur of movement and flashes of light as spells were exchanged and impacted on shields. It was a wonder to watch, if you could follow it. Two, sometimes three, spells were in flight at the same time.

“They’re not throwing spells AT each other.” Ron realized “They’re throwing them where they think they’ll be.”

No one dared interfere, for fear of hitting the wrong target. Finally a spell caught one of the duelers and he went flying, landing on the floor, panting. It was Dumbledore.

“And to think, I once feared you.” sneered Voldemort “A broken old man.” The Dark Lord strutted to stand over his victim. He raised his wand to deliver the death blow.

Hagrid charged and tackled the Dark Lord. The two men rolled over and over each other. Hagrid's huge hand pounded Voldemort in the face, splattering blood. Pressing his advantage, the giant clamped a hand around the green-grey throat and squeezed.

"Sectusempra!" fired Lucius Malfoy at Hagrid's back. Blasting the giant off his Master.

Unconcerned, for the moment, with Hagrid, Voldemort pointed his wand at Dumbledore and screamed "AVADA KEDAVRA!"

At that moment four Aurors, followed MLE Director Bones, and half a dozen additional Aurors, and finally former Auror --- now Minister --- Scrimgeour. Demands of "DROP YOUR WANDS!" echoed across the room.

Just not outnumbered, but outgunned as well, the Death Eaters all popped away. A satisfied grin settled on Voldemort's face. A split second before he Disapparated he said "Not quite to plan, but it will do."

"Hag...(sob)...rid!" Harry choked out in a mournful whisper. He wouldn't have wanted to see Dumbledore dead, despite their differences. Something deep inside Harry broke. Had it not been for Hermione, he would have fallen to the floor when his knees buckled. He just wept and wept and wept.

## 37 – Goodbye

“EHH...EHH...WHA!” Harry awoke out of a dead sleep and felt around for his wand.

Justin Finch-Fletchley had volunteered to remain with Harry in the Hufflepuff dorm until he woke. He'd been reading ahead out of the Sixth Year History of Magic text. He rushed over, grabbed Harry by the shoulders and shook him “Wake up, Potter!” he ordered sharply.

“Justin?” he asked. Then as his eyes focused, he exclaimed “Justin! God! What a nightmare.”

The Hufflepuff shook his head sadly and said “No, it really happened. Susan's downstairs. But, take my advice. Do the three S's first. You stink.”

“Eww...that's me?” Harry complained as he rolled out of bed. Every part of him ached. He made his way to the dorm bathroom leaning on the wall as he went.

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Forewarned by Justin, the others in the Department of Mysteries raid were waiting for Harry right at the staircase to the Boys' dorm. They forcefully chased away any potential onlookers. Even hexing the more stubborn ones.

“Hey.” Susan said softly as she reached for Harry's hand.

“I didn't even think of what happened to you that whole time.” an anguished Harry said.

“Never got off the ground.” She replied as she pulled a rather unwilling Harry into a hug. “For which my Mother will pay.”

Harry only responded to the hug by resting his hands on her hips “I'm glad you didn't.” he muttered “Enough people risked their lives for my stupidity.”

"You weren't stupid Harry." said Hermione "You were tricked. By V-V-well ...you know..."

Ron cut in, adding "And by that Kreacher. Nasty piece of work, him."

"It isn't his fault." Argued Hermione "Poor thing...mistreated all his life."

Ron gave an angry look and started "Sirius should stick his head on--"

"Do not even think of finishing that sente---" Hermione cut him off.

Ginny blasted them both down "YOU TWO ARE IMPOSSIBLE!"

"Ha...haha." Laughed Harry "But I love'em anyway." And as quickly as the humor appeared, it vanished. "Hagrid was my friend, too. Ain't been mucha one to him lately."

Susan ran a comforting hand through his hair and said "Harry, you can cry all you want. Cry until you can't anymore. But, don't go blaming yourself. I don't believe it, and I will not allow you to. Am I understood?"

"Yes'm." muttered Harry, in reply.

"We don't get to boss him around like that." Ron grumbled.

Susan batted her eyelashes at him and declared "I'm cuter!"

"ITS NOT FUNNY!!" yelled Harry. He was immediately regretful for the outburst "Sorry" he muttered "Nothing's funny."

Susan sighed "Harry, luv, do you remember our talk about Cedric? --- Merlin, that seems so long ago --- And it wasn't even a year ago."

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That particular event sat badly in Ginny's mind. She got up and walked out of the Hufflepuff Common Room. Now that her body was

clear of Queredulax and Amortentia, the potions Seamus had been slipping her, Ginny vividly remembered that day.

It had started pleasantly enough. She and Harry were very much wrapped around each other. Then the bubbly, older, redhead had popped into the car.

Ginny had thought she worked out her jealousy issues after Harry had made them relive his torture at the hands of the Dursleys. Then, Susan's arrival reminded her of Rita Skeeter's article in The Daily Prophet. Ginny had gone off with Seamus just to spite Harry.

"Oh! I'm sorry." The Irish boy had said "Where are me manners? I invite a girl over and don't offer her a drink."

Ginny smiled at the overacting "Well, I won't tell if you don't." she joked.

"I'm counting on that. Me poor rep is in yon hands." Seamus replied "Here we go! Pumpkin juice!"

Ginny took the mug and swallowed a mouthful "Doesn't quite taste the same." She commented.

This, Ginny realized, was had been the moment she could have done something that would have prevented most of the school year from playing out as it did for her. With an almost photographic memory of that moment, she recalled that it smelled like pumpkin juice and mostly looked like it too. Though the color was slightly off.

"Me Mum's special homemade blend." Seamus had explained "Better'n that mass-made stuff once you get used to it. Try another swig."

Not wanting to offend the guy who was going to save her from failing History of Magic. And, already slightly influenced, Ginny complied. They spent the next twenty minutes discussing the course material for Fourth Year. "Thanks for your help, Seamus." She said, then "I hope helping me won't mess up your---"

“Not at all.” He replied, charmingly “McGonagall said I’d get extra credit, even House Points. And a pretty girl is always good for a bloke’s rep.”

That had been when Seamus started bad-mouthing Harry.

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“I’m a ruddy, bloody, sodding stupid idiot!” Ginny cursed herself.

The Divination teacher intruded into the girl’s self-recrimination session “There is a certain amount of truth in your evaluation, youth.”

“Nobody asked your opinion, you useless fraud!” Ginny snapped. She had no patience for the subject, and less for the professor of Divination. “And it’s the end of the year, so you can’t give me detention!”

Sounding unlike her normally bizarre self, Sybil Trelawney said “When people consider you useless they rarely look deeper. It is a valuable trick. But, my time in this world is nearly ended.”

“Another vision?” asked Ginny. She couldn’t completely eliminate the sarcasm from her tone. But, the sudden change had her wondering.

Trelawney replied “In a manner of speaking. You figure highly, both in that and in the coming conflict.”

“Me!?” asked Ginny, with a scornful snort. “First I get suckered by a book, then zombified by that idiot Finnegan. And both times, Harry Bloody Potter saves the day!”

Trelawney’s response did little to ease Ginny’s mind “In a warped, perverted sense you are not incorrect, youth.”

“Thanks for nothing.” Ginny grumbled, sullenly.

Trelawney ignored the complaint, asking “And with each challenge, you have advanced. Are you likely to repeat the errors of the past?”

"I'd hafta be daft to fall for that again!" exclaimed Ginny.

Smiling knowingly, Trelawney said "You would not be as prepared as you are now to learn that which you will need. Leaving now, I can assure your return prior to your brother's wedding."

"A whole year!" a panicked Ginny exclaimed.

Trelawney laid a hand on her shoulder and said "My apologies, youth. I thought that you were aware. The wedding will occur in slightly more than a month."

"Ok." said Ginny, then "Wait! How can I be sure I can trust you?"

With an approving nod, Trelawney said "You have learned. Would an Unbreakable Oath witnessed by your father satisfy your concerns?"

"Ahh...sure...Professor." replied Ginny. Her opinion of the Divination Teacher had changed markedly in the last few minutes.

The only witness to their departure was Luna Lovegood, who had just caught up to Ginny. "How odd." The blond Ravenclaw commented "Hermione says it's impossible to Apparate at Hogwarts. I suppose she's wrong."

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Two days later, the entire student body accompanied by the staff, made their way to the shabby looking pile of rocks and straw that had stood for half a century. The normally colorful embroidery of House affiliation that decorated their robes were various shades of gray.

In general, the taller students stood toward the back as they gathered around the front door, to allow the smaller ones a better view. One exception was Harry and the group around him. Susan on one side, held his hand, while Hermione on the other, curled an arm around his waist. Ron stood beside Hermione, with Hannah on his other side. Sirius stood behind him, with a comforting hand on Harry's shoulder.



Ginny Weasley was the only member of the group that had fought He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and the Death Eaters in The Ministry that was not present. Her brothers had been quite concerned about her disappearance, especially after Luna's report. But a letter from Arthur, though not detailed, put their minds at ease.

Hagrid's body, in a large pine casket, was wrapped in a white silk sheet. Emblazoned on the sheet was the Hogwarts crest. It was the only one in color. Fang, the groundskeeper's large grey dog, lay in front of it. A large table held his favorite possessions.

"I was a friend of Hagrid's." Dumbledore said. "For fifty years, Hagrid served this school with all his heart. His last act was to take a Killing Curse meant for me. There is nothing more noble than to give your life for another." He picked up the umbrella that Harry knew to contain the remnants of Hagrid's wand and walked back to his place.

McGonagall stepped forward next and declared "I was a friend of Hagrid's. During my Second Year as a student, the Head Boy was particularly harsh to anyone not in his House. Hagrid was one of the few to stand up to him." She picked up the flute that everyone at Hogwarts had seen Hagrid play and walked back to her place.

A number of other Professors stepped forward as well, and spoke.

"I was a friend of Hagrid's." a tear streaked Harry said. He'd never seen a Wizard funeral before, but he'd caught on. He didn't know what else to say until he saw one of Hedwig's largest feathers among the items. "Hagrid was my first friend here. My first trip to Diagon Alley...he...got me my owl. I shoulda been a better friend to him this year."

Hermione barely managed to speak the formal words. She'd kept her emotions in check while supporting Harry. But, it was finally too much. She would have collapsed, but Ron pushed forward and caught her as she fainted.

"I was a friend of Hagrid's." said Sirius "He was there for my Godson when I could not be. For that, I owe him more than I can ever repay."

He didn't claim anything from the table. Instead, he patted Fang's head and the large gray dog followed him.

When everyone had spoken and the table was empty, Dumbledore spoke again "Thank you all for your kind words. We commend Hagrid's body to the flame. And, wish his spirit well in the next great adventure."

The massive casket floated into the house as the funeral-goers backed away. Under the Headmaster's direction, everyone spread out at a distance, pointed their wands at the house and yelled "INCENDIO!!" Instantly, it erupted in fire. The heat was so intense that the rocks that made up its structure slagged down and glowed red. When --- a few days later --- the mass hardened and cooled, all that was left was a layer of black rock.

"Hehehe!" Draco Malfoy sniggered nastily as he passed the mournful group that included Harry "Good riddance to the fat oaf! How's the hand Potter?"

The events of the last couple days had led to Harry just not crossing paths with his nemesis. At least, that's what Harry believed. Careful use of the Marauders' Map by Hermione had worked to ensure it. Harry's blood started to boil. He snarled at the Slytherin "You really don't wanna start with me, Malfoy!"

"Draco, I was pleased with your change in behavior." Sirius said, getting between the two boys "It gave me great hope you would turn out better than your father."

After making sure of the presence of Crabbe and Goyle, Draco flashed a contemptuous look and said "Too bad you didn't die in the Ministry, Black. It would've put Pureblood wealth back into respectable hands."

"In case you haven't noticed..." said Sirius in a reasonable tone "...you're quite outnumbered. Take my advice and leave."

Draco sneered at his uncle and said "You don't scare me. And neither does this buncha Mudbloods and traitors."

"How'd you like an Incendio up your arse!" growled Ron. And he looked more than ready to do it.

"OH! Please! No!" Draco fake-squealed "Get some culture, Weasel-bee. For example...poetry...I put this little one together in honor of the occasion."

Poor little Potter..... What a rotter..... Look at him cry..... Wonder who'll be next to die.

"Maybe me, maybe you, Malfoy." Harry responded. His tone was flat and soft "Care to find out? Get outta the way, Sirius."

Among the other attendees had been people Harry knew to be members of the Order of the Phoenix. In a group, accompanied by Dumbledore, they came up and intervened. Remus Lupin laid a hand on Harry's shoulder that was part comforting, part restraining.

"Come along with me, Cousin Draco." Tonks said, coldly. Her normally shocking pink hair was a subdued auburn. The young Auror grabbed the blond boy's ear and dragged him along beside her. Crabbe and Goyle huffed and puffed to keep pace. Tonks' lecturing voice faded in the distance "And I'll be keeping my eye on....."

Harry laughed at the spectacle. As the distance increased, he asked "Ain't you worried? I mean there's four of'em."

"Against that group?" countered Remus, dismissively "Tonks would be offended if I followed. Besides, far more effective to have them show up just like that at the Slytherin Common Room."

Sirius snickered amusedly "Still...wouldn't mind trailing along...Y'know...Record the thing for posterity."

"Harry, you and I must talk." said Dumbledore in his calm, measured tones. "Privately."

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Despite his protests, Harry did find himself alone with the Headmaster in his office some minutes later. He flopped down in a chair and snapped "Well?"

"Let us start with displays like that." Dumbledore said, impatiently "Harry, due to your situation, I have always been quite tolerant of your outbursts. But, th---"

Harry whipped out his wand and yelled "REDUCTO!" An entire section of shelving exploded on the Headmaster's left. The Sorting Hat floated to the floor.

"HEXIUS GLOBULUOUS!! countered Dumbledore.

Harry was imprisoned in a ball of six-pointed stars "LET ME OUTTA HERE YOU BLOODY OLD COOT!!" he roared. "DIFF—"

"SILENCIO!" cast Dumbledore "It is most dangerous and unwise to do that, Harry. Spells may enter, but one cast from the inside will reflect back on the user."

Harry roared in frustration, though barely a squeak made it through the spell. He did, thanks to his so-called lessons in Occulumenty, know one spell that didn't follow most of the rules. With great satisfaction, he saw Dumbledore flinch and he managed to pluck that one piece of knowledge from the Headmaster's mind before getting shut out. This time directly at Dumbledore, Harry fired another "REDUCTO!"

"Harry wha---?" asked the Headmaster. Then he felt the Legilimency probe. It wasn't especially powerful, but it was so unexpected that it got through. And, with the spell holding Harry at the front of his mind, the counter-curse was gone before Dumbledore could close his mind. Then, he didn't have time to dwell on the surprise. All he could do was raise a shield against the incoming attack "PROTEGO!"

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Outside, the group waiting for Harry heard explosions. Susan screamed "HARRY!!" and threw herself against the gargoyle. The

guardian threw her back. After Ron pulled her to her feet she charged it again. Only to go sailing through the air.

“Come on, Susan, think rationally.” Hermione said.

Susan nodded and said “Right.” She drew her wand. Hermione had no choice but to duck. “BOMBARDA!” The spell had become a DL favorite. Nothing material could stand up to it, and using it against their shield spells had built up powerful defenses.

Dumbledore’s guardian was no mere stone statue, however. The magical attack brought it fully to life and it lumbered forward, swinging its broadsword.

Without the DL, and without the Department of Mysteries battle, they probably would’ve panicked. But, Ron, Fred, George, Hermione, Hannah and Susan held their ground and they all opened fire at the charging statue. It took two volleys and almost reached the teens, but on the third the screaming gargoyle fell to dust.

“Professor Dumbledore’s going to be so mad.” said Hermione in a faint voice.

Susan gave her an angry look and sneered “Who’s more important? Dumbledore? Or Harry?” The door to the Headmaster’s office presented a new barrier that they began assaulting.

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Alarms had gone off in every Professor’s office. The wards they all controlled to some degree screamed emergency and the source. Wands out, they all headed to the Headmaster’s office. And, despite warnings to stay in dorms, students followed.

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Only staying away from the Unforgivables, Harry fought with everything he had. He nimbly dodged several spells, and viciously blasted away at Dumbledore. He couldn’t tell if the Headmaster was fighting fully --- If so, he wasn’t impressed --- Or Dumbledore was

holding back. Harry found that thought insulting and, driven by adrenaline, fought harder.

Albus was fighting a two-front battle. He had only meant to contain Harry, to get the teen to listen to reason. Instead, he was facing a formidable, if inexperienced, opponent. Had he ONLY be battling Harry, Albus could have contained the teen until he exhausted himself. And that was exactly what he started with. But, his magic was suddenly drained when the gargoyle which guarded his office door came under assault. Not knowing the cause, he had no choice but to fully activate it, further draining his power. Torn between priorities, the Headmaster was now splitting his power between holding the door and matching Harry.

“HARRY STOP!!” screeched Hermione at the top of her lungs. She was the first one through as the door finally splintered.

Fred and George were next through, all they could do was stare at the spectacle.

Susan wasn't so passive. She immediately fired an “Expelliarmus!” at Dumbledore only to have her own wand go flying.

Outside the office, Ron and Hannah had been stunned from behind by Professors led by McGonagall and Sinestra. It was Moody that disarmed Susan. He then disarmed the Heads of Gryffindor and Slytherin. Gruffly, he commented “Those two have issues.”

“Fighting is no way to resolve it!” Minerva complained “Potter! Desist!”

“We think Dumbledore....” George began.

Fred finished “...deserves a good thrashing.”

“Potter's good---I grant that.” Admitted Moody “But, he ain't that good. And he needs to realize that.”

The odds shifted as more professors entered. Intervention became more likely, but less necessary. The Headmaster's shield solidified despite Harry's continued attack. Free of the need to fight two battles,

Dumbledore was able to concentrate his power. Youth and adrenaline had served Harry well against Snape's experience. But, Dumbledore had ten times the younger wizard's knowledge.

"HOLD!" the command echoed, not in the room, but in everyone's minds. And a blinding gold light appeared between the two duelists. The light slowly faded and took the form of a person. The vague form became clearly a man. And, without apparent effect, he took the impacts of both Dumbledore's and Harry's final spells.

Harry slumped back against a wall and panted "Who...the ...blood...y hell...er'you?"

"You were not in the best condition to talk, before, youth." The man said.

With visible effort, Dumbledore straightened and greeted the intruder "Hello Nicolas. You are looking remarkably well."

"Flamel." said Susan, more to herself than anyone else. Her memory flashed instantly to the first time she met the oldest living wizard. Meeting the reclusive celebrity had been something of a thrill. But, it had been clouded by Harry's then critical condition and the dire prediction that Susan deliberately avoided thinking about.

"How is it you're alive?" asked Hermione. She blushed slightly and added in a rush "What I mean is --- after First Year --- the Stone was destroyed."

After brief glances at the combatants, Flamel smiled paternally at her and replied "Ahh... a pleasure to make your acquaintance Miss Granger. A seeker of the truth in the best sense. Tell me, would you consider an event that is perhaps a week or a month away imminent?"

"I—suppose." She replied, haltingly.

"Well," he replied "being somewhat older, my timescale is rather more stretched out."

George snorted in amusement "Like an old sock."

"Like this one?" Flamel said lightly. He waved a hand and an old, torn sock materialized in the boy's mouth.

George spluttered and spit it out in disgust. Then, unable to help himself, joined in the laughter.

That was the moment Sirius entered the Headmaster's office. He took in the massive destruction and the oddly laughing group and demanded "Just what the bloody hell is going on?"

"Ahh...the notorious Mr. Black." Flamel said "I was pleased to hear the outcome of your trial. Your family has been somewhat anti-social recently. It is a vast relief to see someone like yourself break the pattern."

Feeling out of the loop and confused, Sirius replied "Thanks...I think...Harry, are you alright? What are you doing here? The professors could have handled whatever set off the alarms."

"Potter himself was the cause." Professor McGonagall snapped, angrily "Attacking the Headm---"

Flamel interrupted mildly "Minerva, loyalty is a wonderful thing. But blind loyalty will get you into trouble."

"HOW DARE YOU!" the Head of Gryffindor shot back. She was fuming. She didn't care who he was, no one talked to her like that.

The timbre of the ancient wizard's voice changed "Now, it would be best if I spoke to Albus and Harry alone." He said. And, before anyone realized it, they found themselves outside the Headmaster's office again.

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"I...I cou-couldn't h-help m-myself." Ron stuttered. "I can't believe I'm that pathetic! BOMBARDA!!"



The magically restored door to Dumbledore's office held.

"Easy Ron." said Sirius "we all followed orders. It wasn't like any imperious I've heard of though. I don't believe Harry's in any danger so...Why don't you tell me what's going on?"

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Shaking his head sadly, Flamel chided Dumbledore "Did I not tell you --- Albus --- just because people disagree with you, they are not evil."

"Finally!" Harry huffed "See!"

Giving the boy exactly the same expression, Flamel said "As I see it, Harry, in your conflicts with Albus and others you have been right approximately one-half of the time."

"Aww...wha-d-ya know?" Harry grouched.

It wasn't the middle-aged face, but the ancient eyes that silenced his complaint "You and I shall discuss that later, Harry." said Flamel "The two major issues we need, Albus, are for you to also accept that you cannot save everyone."

"Severus---" the Headmaster began.

Flamel interrupted him smoothly "---Will either continue his current path, or not, of his own accord. Nor is it necessarily your fault. And, it certainly is not Harry's."

"I've about had it with hearing about Snape!" exclaimed Harry.

Dumbledore pinched his nose and said "Harry, had you not carried this grudge----"

"YOU'RE BLAMING THAT ON ME!!" Harry roared.

Flamel inserted a quiet "Enough." that silenced both of them "In this case, Albus, I must agree with Harry. And, perhaps, you could have

helped the situation instead of making it worse. At any rate, the other concern is Harry's living arrangements for the summer."

"Of course, due to the Blood Mag---" began the Headmaster.

Glaring at him, Harry snarled "I'd rather live in a sewer than the Dursleys'!"

"That will not be necessary, child." Flamel assured him "And, I would point out that the wards you set up that day are beyond repair. I believe you know that, Albus."

Sighing defeatedly, Dumbledore nodded "Yes, Nicolas, I imagine so. I had hoped that, with some good will, they could be rebuilt."

"I can assure your safety, Harry, in a way that even Albus could not." said Flamel. "Except for two events, you would be entirely out of your enemy's reach."

Offering a sour look, Harry asked "Do you know everything?"

"Knowing everything --- As you put it, youth --- would require infinite knowledge and infinite power." Flamel replied "Now, might I suggest you take your leave of your friends. You and I will be quite busy and contact would be difficult. Meanwhile, Albus and I will settle other matters."

Harry felt amused to see someone talking to Dumbledore the same way as the Headmaster had always talked to him. But one thing worried him "Just how can you do that?"

"You will see when we get there, youth." Nicolas promised "It is best not to offer details, but we will be traveling quite far."

Harry left the two old wizards to talk. The door that had prevented anyone from entering easily yielded to him as he exited Dumbledore's office.

"Harry! I was so worried!" exclaimed Susan as she virtually attacked him.

Harry stroked her head comfortingly and said "I'm fine...why all the upset?"

All she could do was sob into his chest.

"What's the plan, mate?" asked Ron.

Harry tossed a rude look at the door and said "Well Bumbledore wanted me to go to the Dursleys for the summer again."

"NO BLOODY SODDING WAY!!" yelled Sirius. He threw himself against the door to the Headmaster's office and simply bounced. "I'LL KILL THEM THEN I'LL KILL HIM!!"

Harry felt quite pleased, in a way, that his Godfather had suddenly become so angry "Don't worry, Padfoot, that's not happening." he said.

"Oh?" asked Sirius.

Harry nodded "Uh-huh" he replied "Flamel don't even wanna tell Dumbledore where. Kinda wicked watching him get some of his own medicine."

"So, that's what he meant." Susan said sadly.

Harry pulled away a bit and, with a curious look, asked "What do you mean?"

"Flamel..." said Susan "...he said... He told me I wouldn't like it when I saw him again."

This time, Harry frowned and completely pulled out of the embrace "You mean you lied to me?" he asked, accusingly.

"Wha-huh?" confusion lined her face.

Betrayal in his expression, Harry said "Remember. We talked about Flamel. You told me you said EVERYTHING about what happened."

"You're totally wrong. And I don't much care for being called a liar." Her calm tone hid her hurt and anger.

Harry crossed his arms and countered "If the shoe fits---" He didn't finish the sentence as Susan walked off.

"That was low, Potter!" Hannah sneered "And especially after everything she's been through with you!" The blond Hufflepuff rushed off in pursuit of her friend.

Harry felt angry and regretful at the same time. He knew he was right to be angry. But, he hadn't meant to come down that hard. It wasn't that they'd never argued before, but Harry had a much quieter relationship with Susan than he had had with Ginny. Harry was lost in thought until Sirius squeezed his shoulder.

"It's been a while since I dealt with girls, Harry..." The former convict said "...But, I have a hunch something else was on her mind."

Harry slapped the corner of the wall and muttered to himself. Looking down three long hallways, he complained "Wish I had the Map."

"We'll sit with you." Sirius said, speaking for the group. "In the meantime, to quote Ron, what's the plan?"

Shifting his gaze to his Godfather, Harry replied "Well, Mr. Flamel offered to take me someplace where he says Voldemort can't reach me. Better than the Dursleys."

"What about Professor Dumbledore?" asked Hermione "He's always said you're safest with your Aunt."

Harry gave her an unpleasant look and replied "One, I don't think much of Dumbledore anymore. And two, remember last summer? If I never go near that hole again it'll be too soon!"

"Still, I would love to see Nicolas Flamel's home." Hermione said, wistfully (and as a change of subject) "Him and his wife have been around for so long they must have some interesting books."

Harry couldn't help laughing. "I'll see if he can't spare a few." He offered.

It was after fifteen minutes of waiting that Flamel and Dumbledore appeared "It is rather against my better judgment, Harry" the Headmaster said "but Nicolas is certain of maintaining your safety."

"Something...ain't it?" Harry commented "Not having all the answers."

Everyone looked quite uncomfortable at the blatant contempt. The Headmaster merely sighed "I look forward to seeing you in September. Good luck this summer."

"Time presses, Harry." Flamel said "Are you ready?"

Harry gazed down the hallways again, this time forlornly. He felt a new surge of anger and said "Ok. Fine. Let's go."

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Everyone had said their farewells to Harry and were gazing at the empty spot that he and Flamel had been standing in.

"He's gone, ain't he?" an angry sounding Susan complained. She had arrived just in time to see a faint outline of the two wizards vanishing.

Hermione turned to her "Please don't hate him, Sue." She said, softly "He doesn't understand why you...well... did what you did. I'm not exactly sure I do, either. What did you do, anyway?"

"Stay out---" she began, harshly. She shook her head and said "Cancel that...I'm sorry...And, no, I don't hate Harry. I'm angry...and confused. And now, it's gonna be how long before I see him again. And where did Flamel take him, anyway?"

Hermione sighed "Sorry, Sue, they wouldn't tell us. Only that it was better than his relatives'. But, really, Professor Dumbledore did not look happy."

“He’s been looking for a way to pay Bumbledore back for---” Susan was chuckling. Abruptly, she stopped and finished the thought “---For always hiding things from him. And, that’s the way Harry took it.”

It was Ron, surprisingly, who had followed the rather disjointed thoughts “Harry thought you deliberately hid something from him. Something Flamel said.” He said “Does that mean you forgive him? He really cares about you.”

“Oooh-Hoo...No...He’s not getting off that easy.” declared Susan “Just because I understand him don’t mean he don’t deserve a good earful.”

Hannah nodded curtly “Got that right...and then some.”

“You leave that to me, Miss Abbott.” Susan scolded her friend. She turned on Ron and Hermione as well and added “That applies to you, and you, too. They say when he’d be back?”

Hermione answered “Apparently, Mr. Flamel was aware of Bill and Fleur’s wedding, as well as Frank and Paula’s. He guaranteed Harry’s return for them.”

“That long.” Susan commented, disappointedly. Her brother’s wedding was scheduled for the first Saturday in August. The Weasley wedding on the second Saturday. The couple had received separate invitations to that. One had come to Susan through Amelia, who was Arthur Weasley’s boss. The other, to Harry, had come directly from the bride. Fleur’s note apologized for the groom’s lack of manners, stated that she very much wanted to see her fellow Tri-Wizard Champion and, much to Harry’s embarrassment, hoped that he would allow Gabrielle one dance with her hero.

ps. Anyone recognize the formula for the speeches at Hagrid's funeral?

## 38 – Advanced Training

“Whoa, daylight!” exclaimed Harry as he shielded his eyes and squinted.

Nicolas was utterly unaffected “Quite so, youth.” He said coolly “Just the other side of that hill is my home. Shall we?”

“I don’t see how this is all that safe.” Harry commented “And why is it suddenly day?”

Offering a pleased grin, Flamel replied “Those two are more connected than you might think, youth. The answer, however, I would like you to work out for yourself tonight. Seeing is believing, that is a quote from one of your philosophers.”

“Don’t much like mysteries.” Harry grumbled. In spite of himself, Harry found himself relaxing during the walk. Except for the lack of wetness, he would have thought the area had just experienced a thunderstorm. The air tingled pleasantly on his skin.

It was a fifteen minute leisurely stroll to the Flamel residence during which the ancient, but early middle-age appearing wizard said little. “Here we are.” Nicolas finally announced “It isn’t especially large, but it serves my purposes. There is a room---through there---which will be yours for your time here. The wardrobe will supply all the clothes you will need. Just return used clothes at the end of the day. Why don’t you rest for a while. I will wake you this evening.”

“I’m not really tired.” Harry replied. But, he hardly made it into the room before his eyes closed. He fell into a deep sleep.

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Back among Harry’s friends, Rita Skeeter had been freed from custody after Hermione’s tip had led to a sentence for being an unregistered Animagus. Her first article, in Witch Weekly, sent the Wizarding World speculating.

## BOY-WHO-LIVED VANISHES

By Rita Skeeter

I apologize to my loyal readers for my unavoidable absence. But, I have returned. Our world has seen considerable upheaval in the past year. I promise to root out the dirty little facts behind that as well.

However, current events are always first priority. Famous recluse Nicolas Flamel, whose last confirmed appearance dates back to the Grindelwald Era, has apparently made off with Harry Potter. What is truly remarkable about the man is, and this is verified by my sources, he appears little-- if any -- different than fifty years ago.

Flamel's reappearance raises many questions. Among them, Why now? Where has he been? What has he been doing? And, more relevant to now: What is his relationship to Harry? Is he possibly an agent of You-Know-Who?

This reporter wishes to express her deep concern for Harry's welfare. Unfortunately I was incommunicado during the recent disasters in the poor lad's life. But, it seems that returned Headmaster Dumbledore has had entirely too much influence on the boy. Flamel is a known associate of Dumbledore.

Finally, far be it from me to create more drama. But it is a remarkable coincidence that Virginia Weasley, Harry's former girlfriend, has also dropped out of sight. One would have expected her to appear at graduation ceremonies where her two famous (or infamous) brothers formally ended their educations.

Fred and George were quite delighted by the reference, while their mother was less than pleased. "That woman!" Mrs. Weasley growled "She has no place making comments like that!"

"Really, Mum we can use all ...." said George.

Fred concluded "...the free advertising we can get."



“And when are you two going to settle into respectable careers?” she asked, disapprovingly.

Arthur scolded his wife “Now, Molly, while I agree with you about Skeeter...the boys are doing quite well. And I foresee them becoming successful businessmen.”

“Ouch! Father!” Fred exclaimed.

Melodramatically, George clutched his chest and whined “You wound us!”

“I have heard some interesting things from Amos Diggory.” Arthur commented, ignoring the overacting “You know, among other things, his office handles taxes on businesses. So, he would be the first to know that a new one was opening.”

The twins looked at each other, and their father “We combined our ideas---” began George.

“--- with stuff from Lee Jordan---” Fred continued

Proud grins covered their faces “And our magnificent patriarch!”

“As much as I love Grandpop Gideon,” said their Mother “He has always taken risks and been heedless of the consequences.”

Ron, just coming down for breakfast, took in the scene and said “Oh boy, you told her about the store.”

“STORE!?!” exclaimed Mrs. Weasley, glaring alternately at her youngest boys.

Fred glared at Ron and said “We hadn’t gotten that far yet!”

“oops.” Ron said with a smirk. “Then I can’t wait til the part about Harry funding it.”

Turning red, Mrs. Weasley screeched “WHAATTT!!”

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“Ruddy! Bloody! Stupid magazine!” exclaimed Susan Bones as she threw the thing into the fireplace. She felt a certain grim satisfaction as the image of Rita Skeeter screamed as the flames consumed her. “Wouldn’t mind if it were her for real.”

Frank, her brother, swallowed the last gulp of a butterbeer. As a Squib, it affected him more than his sisters. To them, the product their father was responsible for producing was no more intoxicating than a Coke. “Wish this stuff didn’t have such a kick.” He complained lightly. He patted his knee and ordered “Park it.”

“Don’t you think I’m a little big for that?” she asked, as she complied.

Frank gave his sister a light nudge. “So, want me to give that boyfriend of yours a few bruises?” he offered.

“I seem to recall someone saying something like no one better.” Susan said in a contemplative tone. “Anyway, no, after a chat with Ron and Hermione I understand.”

Frank frowned a little and asked “You’re just gonna let him off the hook?”

“He overreacted and I coulda handled it better.” She replied “I’m not angry anymore. I just miss him.” Her shoulders slumped and she leaned against him.

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Harry jumped out of bed, startled out of a sound sleep “Lumos!” he said, and his wand glowed brightly. After spinning around, he realized he was alone in the room. He quickly changed clothes and opened the door.

“Good evening, youth.” Flamel said calmly “I congratulate you on your rapid response to my touch on your mind. You closed me out quite effectively.”

Harry narrowed his eyes and countered “Rude to go poking around in other people’s heads.”

Flamel nodded fractionally “No intrusion was intended. Nor, did I read any one of your thoughts. I merely did the mental equivalent of touching your shoulder. Help yourself to something on the table and follow me.”

“As bad as Dumbledore.” grumbled Harry “But, if I’m gonna get any answers., I guess I got no choice.” He picked up a bunch of grapes, pulled one off and tossed it into his mouth.

Harry’s host was standing a short distance from the door “Come, youth, it is a pleasant evening.” Flamel said “You should find my night sky very interesting.”

“If you say so.” Harry replied, grumpily. He chewed and swallowed another grape. “And while we’re at it... What is it with constantly calling everyone youth?”

Not exactly smiling, Flamel had yet to show any emotion, he replied “Compared to me, everyone at Hogwarts is. Even Albus.”

“Except for your wife.” Harry observed “By the way...will I get to meet her?”

Shaking his head, Nicolas replied “No, Perenelle is involved in another project.”

“The entire summer? I’m sorry you won’t see her.” said Harry.

“Think nothing of it, youth.” Flamel said, dismissively. “Now, tell me about my night sky. Consider it a sort of preliminary exercise.” He pointed the young man to a telescope mounted on a tripod.

Astronomy was another subject that Hermione was number one in. But, Harry wasn't bad either. Looking at the stars had been one of the few things that had given him peace during his years with the Dursleys. His Aunt and Uncle cared little for where he was or what he did as a child. Sometimes he would lay out at night just looking up at the stars. Looking up, he immediately noticed something odd. Harry directed the telescope toward the sky and stared intently for several minutes. Then, he pointed it at another spot in the sky. "Nothing's where it should be." He finally said with a frown. Beginning to feel suspicious, he asked "Where are we? Australia? India? The Falklands?"

"The southern hemisphere is a correct assumption, youth. But, might I suggest redirecting your investigation to the group of stars just above those hills." The older man suggested in his calm tones.

Harry's eyes narrowed as he looked "The Big Dipper doesn't belong in the south." He declared "And, why is it backwards?" He turned on his host and pulled out his wand.

"Well done, youth." Nicolas said. And, ahead of his words, he launched a mental attack.

Harry screamed in pain and fell to his knees.

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"We got him!" Alastair Moody flung the door of the Director's office open and shouted without introduction or preamble.

In the aftermath of the coup against Fudge, Amelia Bones had to take more of an active role in the day-to-day operations of the MLE Department. Fighting had cost the lives of ten Aurors, and one of her most useful administrators had become Minister of Magic. Several retired Aurors, including Moody, returned to active duty. She did not immediately react to the intrusion. After unhurriedly signing a document, she looked up and asked "You needed something, Auror Moody?"

“You think I’d just come in for no reason, Amelia?” he growled impatiently “Snape’s been sighted at Spinner’s End!”

Amelia grabbed her armor; it always stood in the corner of her office. “Report!” she commanded as she climbed into it. Chasing down little things like exploding toilet seats and other Zonko products was a job for civilians under Arthur Weasley’s office. This was something she lived for.

“I imagine he’s gained access to his former home.” The battle-scarred veteran said. “If only Potter had hung around long enough to re-ward the place.”

Chuckling lightly, she countered “Come off it, Alastair. Even you were a boy, once. He had a lot on his mind.”

“That’s no excuse!” Moody snapped “There is no substitute for---”

Amelia cut him off with his own words “CONSTANT VIGILANCE! That is for paranoid veterans like you and me. Let’s go get him.”

“Director, do you really think you should be participating in this?” asked Moody.

She turned around and said “Make sure, I’m tight. And yes, for two reasons. You know how short of manpower we are. And, besides, Snape nearly killed my niece.” With that, the pair disappeared ---

--- And reappeared in the middle of a battle. A red spell whizzed by Amelia’s ear. The tree behind her exploded, spraying bark and leaves everywhere. A moment later, she was tackled and a flippant voice exclaimed “Lookie I got!”

“Sirius!” she yelled “What’re you doing here? Lemme up!”

Deadpanning, he replied “Nice to see you, Sirius. How’s your days, Sirius? Thanks for saving my arse, Sirius.”

“Thank you.” She said, dusting herself off. “Now, you really don’t belong here. Explain.”

Another spell shot by them and Sirius pulled her down again “This is fun.” He quipped “Anyway, I came here to see Harry’s new property. Maybe pick up a clue or two on Snivellus. REDUCTO! When some ward yanked me outta the house.”

“CRUCIO!” came from the house, then the same voice cackled “Come out and play cousin! Just like when we were children!”

Sirius taunted back “Bella! Still Voldie’s whore!”

“ You dare insult The Master!” the witch screeched “AVADA KEDARVA!”

Sirius shoved Amelia one way and fell the other. The spell sizzled between them. “Not even close!” he shouted “Staring at Snakeshit is bad for the eyes Cuz!”

“FOOL!” Bellatrix screamed. She charged out of the house, enraged by her cousin’s disrespect for her Lord.

She was struck by an Imperio from the one-eyed Auror. Moody commanded her “Drop the wand, Bellatrix.”

“ Stupid woman!” sneered the former Potion Master. “FINITE INCANTATUM!!”

Bella’s expression immediately started clearing. She threw herself to the ground, seized her wand and fired another Killing Curse.

Madam Bones flicked her wand and a rock hit the spell in mid-flight, protecting Moody. She also shielded herself from a hex from Snape. Then, she fired an Imperio at the man who’d become her personal enemy. “Snap your wand!” she ordered, vengefully.

“I think not.” Snape countered, emotionlessly. He twisted the mental channel opened between them and reversed it. “Kill Black!”

Amelia, stunned by the tactic, couldn't help obey the order. But, she cleverly used it to her advantage by firing a Killing Curse at Bellatrix (whose pre-marital name was Black). Unfortunately, it missed its mark.

“RICTUSEMPRA!” Sirius bellowed. He grinned maliciously as the spell exploded against Snape, blasting his longtime nemesis through a wall.

Bellatrix hit him with a Cruciatus and cackled insanely while her cousin twisted in agony. That was when the air filled with pops. A veritable army of reinforcements, led by Kingsley Shacklebolt apparated into the area. “Anti-apparation wards! NOW!” the huge black man ordered

“SERPENSORTIA!” Snape yelled, and a dozen snakes leapt from his wand. He and his ally used the momentary distraction to vanish. Destroying the snakes took precious seconds during which the Aurors didn't put up the Anti-apparation wards. By the time the last conjured snake was killed, the dark pair was gone.

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Harry's brain was on fire. The completely unexpected attack had torn through his automatic shields. Surprisingly, though, he found the pain tolerable. “Bastard!” he snarled. He fired a disarming spell, but missed. The pain seemed to last forever and he finally sagged in defeat.

“Well done, youth.” Nicolas Flamel said “Rest for a moment.”

Slowly, Harry shook off the effects. “What the fuck was that!?” he cursed. He trained his wand on the man, completely confused.

“You need to maintain active shielding at all times.” Flamel said, instructively. “You did manage to strike back while under attack, which was excellent. NOW! SHIELD UP!”

With the minimal warning, Harry managed to concentrate all the Occulumenty he'd been taught by Aurors acting on Madam Bones' instructions. It felt like someone was pounding on his forehead. He held up through several attacks before again collapsing. "Well, finish it!" he growled.

"You mean kill you?" asked Flamel, as casually as if he were talking of the weather. "That is not, and never has been, my intention, youth. Surely, you have enough enemies."

Beyond fear, Harry sneered at him "So you just do this for fun, huh? You're no better than Snape!" He lashed out with a mental attack of his own.

"Well done, youth." Flamel praised. There was no indication that he'd had any trouble blocking Harry's attack "Now, tell me, did you know how to do that before you came here?"

Harry thought about what he'd done and realized he had done something completely new. He nodded curtly and admitted "No, I didn't. But I had to do something. I guess I...I saw what you did, and--"

"Exactly, youth, exactly." A pleased Flamel confirmed "Now, while you recover your strength, I will answer the mystery I posed. The appearance of constellations depends upon your frame of reference. It is also the reason I could say with certainty that the entity calling himself Lord Voldemort cannot reach you here. We are approximately three thousand light-years from Earth."

Harry, who had been drinking a glass of water, dropped it, sprayed it, and choked for several seconds. "I---I don't b—b—believe it!" he exclaimed.

"My world is unknown to your scientists at this time." Flamel said, completely unperturbed by Harry's outburst. "It will be quite some time before your people will be ready to meet mine. But, from time to time, we do assist without directly interfering. You, Harry Potter, are the first Human to visit here."



The calm tones convinced Harry that he was telling the truth, he asked "Not even Dumbledore?"

"The situation was not as critical then as it is now." Flamel explained "There was little doubt Albus would defeat Grindelwald. Your situation is very different. Without help, you are quite outmatched. I mean no insult, you have great potential. Voldemort has fifty years experience on you."

Harry swallowed nervously and nodded "I know, I never understood how I beat him in the first place. And, how can I do it now? I'm just a kid."

"That is what I brought you here for." Flamel answered "Consider what you were doing with your Defense League. You...very correctly... taught your group to build up their defenses by resisting repeated attacks. Now, we will be doing the same for you."

Harry glared angrily at his host "It would have helped if you told me that in the beginning." He complained.

"Then, youth, I would not have gotten your true measure." Flamel replied, as calmly as ever. "You were both tenacious in your defense and composed in defeat. Now, I will push you to the utmost. But, be assured I will not, at any time, raise the severity to the point of permanent damage."

Harry became ever stronger during the repeated grueling sessions. The assaults had increased in intensity. He was absorbing, easily, thrusts that would have burned out his brain at first. His life had narrowed to eating, sleeping and fighting off Flamel. Often, he wasn't sure whether it was day or night. During a surprisingly long quiet period, he happened to have brushed his chin and found it rough. Quite disturbed, he sought out his host and without any sort of introduction, demanded "Just how long have I been here?"

"Thirty-six Earth days, youth." He replied.

Furious, Harry launched an attack of his own. He felt no satisfaction as he watched his heaviest bolt ricochet harmlessly off Flamel's shield. He wasn't angry at the alien, but at himself. "For a whole month!" he yelled, frustratedly "Hagrid and Hedwig are dead and I haven't thought about them all this time! And I had that stupid fight with Sue before I left! AARRRG!! What's the matter with me?!"

"I must take responsibility for that particular incident, youth." Flamel explained coolly. "It was necessary to have you focused---"

Harry cut him off angrily "You're worse than Dumbledore! I thought he was a manipulative old man!"

"Thus far, you have compared me to your former Potions instructor and, now to Albus." observed Flamel "Will you next compare me to Voldemort?"

Harry threw up his arms in disgust and stormed off. He ran outside and ran until he was exhausted. Then he fell on the grass and cried. All the forgotten emotions, things he just hadn't had time for, rushed back. Hours later, he made his way back to Flamel's home and said "It's time for me to leave."

"You have come far, youth." Flamel said "And learned much---"

Interrupting, he put in "And my name's Harry! Try using it once in a while!"

"---however, I do not believe you have learned to apparate home." Flamel pointed out.

Harry's retort died in his throat. And he did something he hadn't done in spite of all the mental duels he'd had with Flamel. He drew his wand on his host. "I do know the Killing Curse." He said, dangerously.

"That is one important item I hope you have learned, youth." said Flamel, he was completely unafraid.

Harry couldn't bring himself to do it, he just let his wand fall to his side. "Wha'd'ya mean?" he mumbled.

"It has been decided that I can give you a thought, which, properly studied, will change the way you think about what is called magic." Flamel said. "List for me the courses offered at Hogwarts."

Harry thought for a moment and replied "Potions, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Wizard Government, Charms, Transfiguration, Astronomy, Runes, Herbology and Divination. Don't think much of that last."

"All knowledge, youth, is one." said Flamel "I recognize that you gave me that list based on your schedule. But, allow me to rearrange that somewhat --- Runes, Astronomy and Government in one category. Herbology and Potions in another. And, we are left with Divination, Defense, Charms and Transfiguration. Note that those four require intense concentration, and can change your reality. Defending your mind against attack, as we have been doing, is another phase of that."

Confusion replaced Harry's anger "I don't understand, sir." He said "I don't see any connection between Divination and the others. And Transfiguration and Charms are about changing one thing into another. Defense isn't."

"You might learn something by having a chat with one Lavender Brown when you return to Earth." Flamel suggested "And, I would think, learning to defend yourself in a duel has a strong affect on your reality. Losing could leave you departing this plane of existence."

Harry snorted "You mean dead. I get the point."

"Since you will learn this in due time, I will tell you that your training here has made you immune to the effects of the Cruciatus Curse." Flamel offered.

Harry grinned in a way that was both mischievous and malicious. "Voldie's gonna just love that." He commented, then "Now, I have a

question...Seems to me --- If you can travel halfway across the universe --- you could beat Voldemort with one hand tied behind your back."

"That, youth, is a speculation --- not a question." Flamel said, distantly. It was like a brick wall had descended between them. "I need a moment of concentration to send you back to Earth."

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"Now just a ---" Harry began. And between words, not knowing how it had happened, he found himself in the kitchen of #12 Grimmauld Place. "---second!" Three additional surprise changes greeted Harry, although he would not be fully aware of them until later.

"EXPELLIARMUS!" yelled a voice.

This was the first surprise Harry perceived. He'd 'felt' someone approaching. And, even before the entire spell had been called out, the attacker's wand flew out of his hand and into Harry's. Although he knew exactly who he was fighting, he didn't pull his punch "IMPEDIMENTA!" Harry fired back. It was over in three seconds. He flippantly asked "That any way to greet your Godson?"

"Harry?" asked Sirius Black. There was more than a hint of mistrust in that one word.

Smirking, he replied "None other. What happened, Padfoot? You get old while I was gone?"

"THA' RUDDY HELL'S GOIN' ON!?" an indignant Ron complained "Two in the bloody morning and you wanna go waking up the whole neighborhood! Lumos! And it's pitch dark in here!"

That was the next surprise for Harry. He hadn't even thought of turning on lights. He squinted for a moment as his vision adjusted. "Hey Ron!" he said, happily. And, unabashedly bear-hugged his best friend.

“Alright, alright” the redhead grumbled “Good to see you, too. Now cut it out.”

Harry laughed at Ron discomfiture and embraced Sirius. That led to Harry’s third discovery, he lifted his Godfather off his feet effortlessly.

“Been workin’ out?” asked Sirius. He squeezed his Godson’s upper arms and whistled softly. “Well, I ain’t wrestling you unless it’s as Snuffles. What’d Flamel do to you?”

Harry hesitated, then jokingly commented “Ya got a few hours? It’s a long story.”

“You really get to have all the fun.” Ron said, a little jealously as Harry concluded his tale. “First person to visit another planet.”

Remembering his history, Harry replied “Not true, actually. American Muggles did it way back in the 1960’s.”

“It wasn’t that long ago.” Sirius grumbled. Both boys laughed. Overriding them, he added “If I had known he was going to put you through that, Harry, I would’ve stopped him.”

Harry grinned at him and said “I appreciate it...really...But, I learned so much. And, besides, it beats the hell outta summer with the Dursleys.”

“Still, when he comes back, I’m gonna give ’em a piece of my mind.” declared Sirius.

Harry’s smile lingered for a moment then faded “We won’t see him again in this plane of existence.” He said. And, despite the abrupt departure, he felt a pang of loss.

“... This plane of existence...” mimicked Ron “Don’t even think Dumbledore uses that one.”

Harry shrugged "Flamel gave me a lot to think about. But --- someday --- we'll be out there." He got up, looked out the kitchen window and sighed. "Anyway, what's been going on around here?"

"Harry-wawwy misses his Suzy-woozy!" cackled Sirius.

Harry felt a hot flush of embarrassment, followed by a spike of temper. Then, his Godfather cried out as if in agony and fell out of his chair. Harry rushed over and pulled his head into his lap "Ohhh! GOD!! NOOOO!!!" he wailed.

"Wha'appened?" mumbled Sirius, as his eyes fluttered opened "Feel like a troll been using me-ead for Beater practice."

"S'all my fault...So sorry, Sirius." sobbed Harry.

Sirius staggered to his feet, helped by Ron and Harry, and leaned against the kitchen table. "I'm fine....at least I will be as soon as the room stops spinning. Wow...I'm pretty good at Occlumency...Wasn't ready for that... But it went through...Don't think I could've stopped it anyway." his thoughts rambled until he was able to focus on Harry, he asked "What, exactly, did you do?"

"Can you teach me?" asked Ron.

Harry explained "Flamel taught me that magic isn't what we think it is. It's all about using your mind to change reality. Spells, wands, crystal balls --- all that stuff --- is just ways to help you concentrate. I never saw him use a wand, not once."

"If he's so powerful, then why don't he just kill You-Know-Who?" asked Ron.

Harry laughed bitterly and replied "When I asked him that, he sent me back. I guess that's my job."

"Not if I have anything to say about it!" Sirius declared "He'll have to get through me first!"

Harry smiled at the protective 'parental' remark. He'd never had that growing up. It gave him a very warm feeling inside. But, in the back of his mind, he felt he had hit on something. He also knew that he had to be very careful in the future. "Let's change the subject. Where's everyone else?" he asked.

"Ginny went off with Trelawney about the same time you disappeared with Flamel." Ron replied, darkly. "Molly went ballistic."

Sirius interrupted "Ron, I know you're not getting along, but she's your---

After shooting him a glare, Ron continued "She read this Skeeter article that said you kidnapped her and turned her into some kinda sex slave."

"Wait!" Harry snapped "I thought Hermione turning her in put Rita out of action."

Sirius explained "Rita paid a couple thousand Galleons and was freed a couple days after you left."

"Great...just bloody great." Harry grumbled "I need her like I need a ruddy hole in the head. WAIT! Sue --- She musta read---

Sirius pushed him back into a chair and said "Keep your shirt on, Harry. That girl of yours is too smart to listen to that drivel."

"But we had that stupid fight!" Harry complained "And---

"What?" asked Sirius "You're going to show up on her doorstep before the sun even comes up. And looking like a Muggle chimney sweep. You're going to --- One, clean that stuff off your chin. --- Two, take a long hot shower. --- And, three, get into some decent clothes. Instead of this weird alien shit Flamel gave you."

"But"

Sirius spoke right over him “And, finally, you are going to have a nice, big, leisurely breakfast...DOBBY!”

“What can Dobby be doing for Harry Potter’s Godfather?” the former Malfoy elf asked. There had been a definite change in him while Harry was gone. The stained, thread bare, grimy tea cozy had given way to a one-piece black outfit that would have looked military if it wasn’t for the fact that the material looked like velvet. And Dobby’s drooping ears now stood firm.

Harry guessed the House-elf looked twenty years younger. Though he really had no idea how old Dobby was. “Good to see you again, Dobby.” He said softly, worried about the traditional explosion of emotion.

Dobby’s eyes bulged and his ears nearly doubled his height “HARRYYYY POTERRRR SIRRRRR!” he exclaimed. Then, after a guilty glance at Sirius, and with considerable effort said “Welcome home. Yous needing something?”

“Breakfast, please.” Ordered Sirius. “Bacon, eggs, toast --- and Dobby --- remember what I said about overkill. About half an hour.”

Dobby looked down at the floor, then vanished in a puff of smoke.

“The first time, he as for a huge helping of spaghetti!” Ron laughed “Dobby made a bowl so big it crushed the table. Sirius had to buy a new one!”

Sirius flipped him a look then ordered “Off with you, Potter!”

“Wake me when Dobby comes back.” Ron said while sucking in a big yawn. It wasn’t natural to be awake from 2AM to 4AM.

Sirius snickered in amusement at the boy’s retreating back “After telling the spaghetti story...” he muttered “Yeah right, snore away kiddo.” With the minor bit of mischief done, Sirius was left to consider that his supposedly alot-to-learn Godson had just wiped the floor with



him. Both, physically and mentally. And, out of sight of said Godson, he whimpered “Dobby! Headache potion! Make it a double!!”

I'm already into the next chapter and I hope to get it out before I go on vacation at the end of June.

## 39 – Mr. & Mrs. Bones

Hermione Granger, number one in her year at Hogwarts, and number one in every individual class she took (except for Defense – Harry & Herbology – Neville Longbottom) was equally talented in most things Muggle. Determined to keep a foot in each world, she confidently entered the Licensing office to obtain a Driver Learner's Permit.

"You're not using any magic to help with the answers, are you?" her father whispered.

Hermione looked offended "Of course not Father!" she declared primly "I spent an hour a day studying the Drivers' Manual for the last month!"

"A perfect score." The testing monitor announced. "Don't see too many of those."

Hermione was quite pleased with herself. She practically demanded to drive back to her parents' dental office. And, after less than a mile, learned that experience counts for more than book learning. Instead of hitting the brake, she hit the gas and plowed into a car stopped at the light. And, if that wasn't bad enough, it was a police car. "I am soooo sorry, Officer!" she exclaimed "How could I be so stupid?!"

"Just who taught you to drive?" the policeman demanded, unfeelingly. In all but appearance, he was a Muggle version of Dolohov. "I am citing you for reckless driving and going against the flow of traffic. Sign here and initial here. You will be notified of a hearing date by mail, should you choose to contest. I would advise against it if I were you. Just be grateful I'm not arresting you."

Hermione turned away and cried into her father's shoulder. "That is quite enough, Officer." Mr. Granger said, protectively. "You have done as much damage as the accident. I will be speaking to your commander."

"Your word against mine, bub." He drove away in the still usable police car.

Some twenty minutes later, a tow-truck pulled up “Ouch!” the driver said as he glanced at the twisted metal of the front of the car. “Good to see no one’s hurt. Hello, Hermione. Didn’t know it would actually be you.”

“Sorry, I don’t---“ Hermione started, confused.

The man finished her sentence “---recognize me with all the oil stains. Sorry, had a messy repair. My sister’s birthday party...Hogsmeade. Granger’s not the most common name. So I hoped at least for a way to contact you.”

“AR-HUM!” Hermione’s father coughed, impatiently. “This is all very interesting, but---”

The girl took care of introductions “Sorry, Daddy, this is Frank Bones. His sister is Harry’s girlfriend.”

“Good to meet you.” said Frank “I’d shake hands, but ahhh...” He held up a blackened hand. Putting his strength to good use, it took him only a couple of minutes to load the car onto his truck.

Ten minutes later, they arrived at Frank’s work Geddes’ Auto Repair the sign said. Mr. Granger had used his cell phone to arrange to have a rental car waiting. “Call my office as soon as you have an estimate.” He said, handing over his business card.

“Not a problem. Should be some time this afternoon.” Frank answered.

This time, they did shake hands. “Well, we’ll be off then.” Mr. Granger said “Come on, Hermione, if you fall off a horse, the best thing for it is to get right back on, again.”

“Yes sir.” She replied, nervously.

Frank grabbed her elbow and said “Just a sec. The wedding’s in a couple of weeks and we didn’t have an address for you. “Regular

Muggle wedding, Paula's Catholic so it'll be in a church. And, hey, don't be so hard on yourself. Things happen."

"Bet you didn't crash a car and wreck a police car YOUR first time driving." Hermione muttered.

To which Frank laughed "No, I didn't." he admitted. "But, I started as a helmsman. Why do you think my captain locked me in the engine room? Nearly sank an aircraft carrier. Mind you...it was one of ours. Don't suppose you've heard from Harry?"

"No." she sighed "But, it's pretty normal. And at least he is away from his Aunt and Uncle."

Frank growled impatiently at that remark "Don't suppose there's any chance there'll be a reconciliation. I really don't want any drama."

"Well...like I said before...I don't think you'll be able to completely avoid a confrontation." Hermione said "The ceremony, at least, shouldn't be a problem. Just sit Harry with the groom's side and the Dursleys with the bride's side."

Reluctantly, he replied "That seems extreme. Harry's got a hot temper, I've seen it. Besides, I met the Dursleys, they seem right enough. Don't much care for the kid, I admit. Seemed spoiled and a little too interested in Paula's skirt...if you get my meaning."

"Dudley...I'll keep that in mind." Hermione replied "Look, Frank, you asked my advice. Do you know what a Pensieve is? (Frank nodded) I have seen Harry's memories. Trust me on this. Do not sit them together." And she left him with that thought.

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Thankfully, no one interrupted breakfast. Harry would have been most annoyed if he'd had to deal with Dumbledore. And, his first priority was his girlfriend. Sirius had a good enough point when it came to not waking anyone up at 4AM would have been stupid. But, that didn't keep Harry from being impatient. Dobby's food had

managed that. "Enough!" he finally protested "Thank you, Dobby! But if I eat one more thing, I'll have egg drip out my ear!"

"Not a pleasant image." commented Sirius "You'd think Flamel didn't feed you. He did....didn't he?"

Harry grinned sleepily and replied "Yes, oh overprotective one. It's just his idea of food is rather boring. Kinda like eating rice cakes all the time. Forgot what real food tastes like."

"One thing before you vanish, Dobby." Sirius addressed the house-elf and handed him a few coins "I imagine we need to restock a bit. Here's twenty Galleons. If you need more, come back and let me know."

Dobby bowed and said "Of course, Lord Black, with Master Harry Potter's permission."

"LORD Black???" asked Harry with raised eyebrows. "And, Dobby, I...it's Harry...just Harry."

Sirius smirked and retorted "Get used to it, kiddo."

"Harry Potter freed Dobby from nasty Malfoys." The elf gushed "Harry Potter is the kindest, bravest, greatest---"

Harry glared at the giggling Sirius and cut off Dobby, desperately "Alright, alright, alright!"

"It's really all your fault." Sirius offered, unhelpfully "You should learn to control that kind, giving nature of yours."

Dobby nodded in eager agreement.

Harry just sighed "Whatever...Anyway...is 9AM good enough?"

"Impatient little bugger ain'tcha?" asked Sirius. He snorted in amusement at his Godson's expression and answered "Fine. Go. But, I'd Floo call first just to be---"

A brief breeze announced Harry's departure.

"That didn't take long." Sirius commented, speaking to no one, as a green flash appeared.

A wisp of smoke brought Dobby back into the room. The elf said "Floo call for Lord Black, from his Bonesie."

"It's a bit early for that, Dobby." Sirius said, a touch wistfully. Knowing the likely reason for the call, he took his time, leisurely popping open a butterbeer. He now strictly stocked Kinison brand, which was produced by Susan's father. He strolled into the main living room, sat in a chair and addressed the fire "Morning, Ami. And how are you this fine summer morn?"

The fire cracked and sparked angrily "Don't give me that!" Amelia Bones rumbled "Come on Sirius! You know why I called!"

"Just to talk to me, of course." He retorted in a silky tone "So nice to be appreciated."

The fire roared higher in the fireplace and she threatened "Keep that up and I'll find something to arrest you for!"

"Handcuffs, too?" he asked, not at all scared. Sirius even put a hopeful tone in the query.

The Head of the MLE sighed in defeat and said "Right, you win. I'll ask. Is Harry back, and did he, or did he not, just Floo over to my brother-in-law's?"

"He couldn't very well Floo from here if he wasn't back." answered Sirius.

Her eyes narrowed "That did not answer my question. Now come on.....I'm serious."

"You are?" he countered "Well I make a pretty fine woman!"

Amelia just groaned.

“Right, sorry.” He said, not sounding the least bit so. “Yeah, he just popped in, out of nowhere, unannounced. And when I tried to defend my kitchen from the intruder, he wiped the floor with me. There’s more, but I’m not saying over a Floo.”

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Susan Bones was in for a series of surprises as Harry flooded in. The first was his lack of trouble with arrival. He stepped out as smoothly and in control as if between two steps. The second occurred to her during the quite lengthy greeting kiss. Harry held her off the ground effortlessly. Given the half foot height difference, that wasn’t too surprising, at first. But several minutes later was another matter.

“Daddy, how do you hold your breath that long?” asked a giggly Tina Bones.

Harry gave an involuntary flinch, pulled his lips from Susan’s and stammered “Ahh...errmmm...that...I...umm---“

“CHRISTINA BONES!!” Susan screeched as she spun around. Neil Bones was no where to be found. The redheaded witch ran off in pursuit of her blond sister.

Tina exited the room at top speed yelling “HI HARRY!” and laughing. The younger girl was in the middle of a growth spurt, but still was not a match for Susan, who relished having a height and weight advantage.

“Nice to see the training did so well.” Harry commented, lightly. Not as familiar with the layout of the house, he didn’t run like the girls did. He found Susan straddling her sister and struggling to pin her hands to the kitchen floor. Harry knelt down, pinched her side and commented “What you get for interrupting a good snog.”

Susan was able to pin her sister's hands to the kitchen floor. She exclaimed "Victory!"

"No fair!" Tina pouted, and grunting with effort, "I'm just...a...poor de...fense...less girl!"

Harry laughed at that. "Yeah right." He snorted "Except for the wrong hair color, you may as well be a Weasley twin."

"Can't be a twin." The blond girl argued, playfully "That'd make three."

Susan and Harry chuckled. "I really missed you, Harry." She said, suddenly serious.

"Nick hardly gave me a chance to breathe." replied Harry.

Clever girl that Tina was, she said "I think I'll go knit...or something."

"But, when I did... all I thought about was you." He continued, unaware of the younger Bones departure. "And there was that stupid fight. Sue, I'm sorry."

With a bit of a playful smile, she replied "Well...Ill --- I admit, I was gonna pretend to still be angry... But that whole kiss in the fireplace kinda ruined it."

"Was the best kiss I had in over a month." He retorted in the same manner.

She grunted and crossed her arms "Well, I should hope so."

"Jealous?" asked Harry.

Susan ignored the question, saying "While I am not holding a grudge, I want to say that I would never deliberately lie to you."



“You didn’t want to talk much about Flamel because he told you about how his return would mean trouble for us.” Harry completed her thought.

She could only nod and say “Uh-Huh.”

“According to him, I didn’t need the distraction that thinking of you would’ve caused.” He said, bitterly.

Susan frowned “Why...that means he deliberately said what he said.” she concluded “And, not only did he figure how I’d react, he knew exactly how you would, too. Harry, I don’t much like being manipulated.”

“I know exactly how you feel, Sue. Believe me.” Harry sympathized “Dumbledore’s been doing it to me forever. Before I was even born, I think. I’ll know for sure the next time we talk.”

The hard edge in her boyfriend’s voice concerned Susan. The last time they’d tangled, in the Headmaster’s office, had been scary. And, from her perspective, she wasn’t sure who she was afraid for. “Harry, don’t go looking for a fight.” She said, softly. “I like this new, confident, you. But, maybe you should let some water... like maybe an ocean’s worth... pass under the bridge, before talking to him. Okay?”

“I won’t start anything.” He offered, grudgingly “But, I know he knows things he’s not telling me.”

Susan was not letting Harry leave to chase after Dumbledore. She paused on the brink of saying just that, and thought ‘Last thing I want is a Dumbledore argument’ There was another, better, way of distracting him. Susan snuggled up and wrapped her arms around his waist. “Y’know” she said seductively “there’s other things a couple of randy teenagers can do when Mummy and Daddy aren’t around.”

“How very Slytheriny of you, dear.” He said, grinning. And any response on Susan’s part was cut off by Harry kissing her.

Normally the aggressor, thanks to her boyfriend's loveless upbringing, it took Susan a moment to adjust. "Missed me, didja?" she quipped between intense kisses.

"M'busy." Harry mumbled as he let his teeth drag down her neck to her shoulder.

Maybe it wasn't fair, Susan reflected, but in her younger explorations boys hadn't been much interested her enjoyment. It's why she never really had a serious boyfriend. But, gem that Harry was, he'd found a G spot on her that she hadn't even known about. Drove her half insane, too! "You know what that does to me!" she gritted out from between clenched teeth.

"So I should stop?" he asked, innocently.

She slapped his bicep and it was there she discovered Harry's new-found strength. "What --- pray tell --- is this?" she asked. It wasn't the massive muscle of her brother, but the hard knot under her fingers was new.

"My arm." He answered, casually.

Susan snorted, partly amusement partly annoyance. She explained, poking the muscle "I am talking about this. It's gotta be twice as big as it was."

"Gee, I never even noticed." Harry replied. "I guess Flamel did me more good than I thought." He flexed his arm and clenched a fist causing it to push up more.

Susan took his hand and nipped at a couple of fingers. "You don't have to impress me, Harry." she said and kissed him again. He didn't bother asking what she meant by that.

Several minutes into their completely non-verbal reunion, Harry grunted and pulled away. His lessons with who everyone knew as the oldest living wizard had given his mind protections that did not require

constant concentration. "I felt that!" he growled "Where are you, Dumbledore?!"

"I am right here, Harry." The Headmaster of Hogwarts announced calmly. A faint whir, and he was visible.

"Get out." Harry ordered, coldly.

At that moment, Tina came running into the kitchen "I felt the wards!" she shouted, urgently. She handed Susan her wand.

"It's alright, we got the intruder." Susan said "Professor, you had best explain yourself."

Dumbledore scowled slightly "You were aware of the agreement, between myself and your Aunt, were you not, Miss Bones?"

"Auntie only said she would let you know if she heard from Harry." She argued back.

"And yet" the Headmaster continued "you, Miss Bones, chose to disregard that."

"The way I see it, he can send you an owl if he wants to talk to you." Susan snapped "And, meanwhile, have you ever heard of knocking?"

Tina, with a sly look, offered "I could get a Wheezey stinkbomb."

Dumbledore's eye twitched. Harry stayed silent. He hadn't learned about that particular incident. The main thing was that the Bones girls were doing just fine.

"Go do that." Susan told her sister.

The Headmaster addressed himself to Harry "We have a number of things to discuss."

"Right now, you need to get out of my house." Susan demanded "And don't come back unless BOTH my parents are here!"

Dumbledore could only nod. "Come, Harry."

"No." Susan shook her head and took her boyfriend's arm "Harry is my guest."

" I cannot approve of two teenagers alone together." The Headmaster stated.

Harry started to retort, but a firm squeeze from Susan quieted him. Her smirk reminded him of his school nemesis. Not surprising, as he remembered they were related. That made him think of something Flamel had said. He hardly noticed the Headmaster's departure. "Hey Sue take me up to your room!" he said excitedly.

"Harry! After what I just said?!" she exclaimed, blushing.

Frowning in confusion, he replied "Sorry. Wasn't paying attention. By the way...where's Dumbledore?"

"She chased him off by threatening to shag you!" Tina replied in a fit of giggles.

Susan's flush deepened to near-purple "RUNT!" she yelled at her sister "That's not what I said!"

"Be taller'n you soon enough, shortie." the younger girl jeered and took off at a full sprint.

Harry caught Susan's wrist, preventing her from chasing off in pursuit. "I'd want to --- y'know." He said, gulping nervously. "But uhmm...actually---THAT--- wasn't on my mind. I was thinking about Granny Malfoy."

"ALARM!! ALARM!!" the painting bellowed "MALE PRESENCE IN THE FEMALE CHAMBERS!!"

Harry glared at Lady Malfoy and said "Be silent!" Even he was surprised when, despite her continually moving mouth, no sound came out.

"How'd you do that?" asked Susan.

Harry shrugged and replied "Not sure, exactly. But, handy...huh? Anyway, I need information. You can travel between here and Malfoy Manor, right?"

"What's in it for me? Or, more to the point, my family?" she asked, shrewdly.

Susan put in "I'm your family too, Grandmother. If You-Know-Who wins what do you think will happen to me?"

"I find this You-Know-Who nonsense quite absurd." The portrait said.

Harry laughed, liking the woman "Ma'am, have you ever seen Voldemort?"

"Oh yes!" she replied with loathing. "Foul creature! Bad tempered and ill-mannered. Treats representatives of our greatest families like some nasty schoolboy watching insects fry under a magnifying glass!"

That, by itself was useful intelligence. It meant that the Dark Lord had been in the Malfoy House at least once. Probably many times.

"Gran-mama" Susan said, using her meekest voice "You taught me and Christina the importance of saving ourselves for the right man. Well, I know Harry's the one for me. But, I promise you, help him in this and we will not ----ahhh --- do anything in this room that you would disapprove of."

Lady Malfoy clapped almost childishly "Excellent Grand-baby!" she cheered "I shall hold you to your pledge. I agree! And, I shall answer any of your young man's questions! Just a smidge more cunning and you would have been in Slytherin."

“Thank you, Gran-mama.” said Susan “We’ll be going now. Mother and Father should be home soon.” And she hurriedly pulled a confused looking Harry along.

“Err...” Harry mumbled incoherently.

Susan giggled then hugged him “Sorry I sprung that all at once. Sudden inspiration.” She apologized.

“We don’t have to do anything you don’t wanna.” said Harry in a disgruntled tone “But, I don’t like being tied to what some stupid painting thinks.”

His expression made her want to kick herself. “Harry” she said softly “I’ll let you in on a big secret. Girls think about sex just as much as boys do. Maybe more.”

“Huh?” he grunted with a curious look.

“It’s true. Ever listen to Eddie Murphy?” she confirmed. In answer to his expression, she explained “Muggle American comedian. I ...ummm...borrowed a CD from Frank when I was eight. His sub visited the States --- well, never mind, off topic. Anyway, the only thing I really promised was that we wouldn’t be snogging --- or more -- in my bedroom.”

“Or more?” asked Harry. His eyebrows about left his forehead.

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The build-up to Frank’s wedding meant that Harry didn’t get to spend nearly as much time with his girlfriend as he would have liked. He did, however, have plenty of time to catch up with Ron. Although the family had united to support Ginny during Seamus Finnegan’s trial, the animosity continued. Harry learned that his former girlfriend had disappeared with the odd-ball Professor Trelawney the same day as Hagrid’s funeral. He wondered if there was a connection between that

and his own interstellar trip. But, he didn't share his speculation with his best friend.

Ron's mother had another nasty quarrel with Sirius, who had reached his breaking point and ordered her out. Fred and George remained at Grimmauld Place until their joke store opened, then moved into the apartment above it.

By far, the deepest rift was between Ron and Mrs. Weasley. He flatly refused to return to The Burrow and she had threatened to disown him. Both Gideon (Molly's Grandfather) and Arthur were trying to make peace, but mother and son were not on speaking terms.

"And just to make things really fun" Ron concluded, sarcastically "Fleur and Bill rowed over you coming to the wedding. Take a guess how Mummy feels."

Harry looked at his friend and summed it up eloquently "Shit."

"Language, Harry!" snapped Ron in a higher than normal pitch.

Harry smacked his head and countered "Stuff it, Hermione."

"Never been to a Muggle wedding." commented Ron "Anything we have to do?"

"Not like the Dursleys ever took me to one." Harry said, sourly. "Looking forward to them like an Umbridge detention. (sigh) Never mind that...sorry, Ron... Hannah told you the wedding party had to dance together?"

Nodding, the red-haired boy replied "Yeah, and a hint about not getting jealous."

"Hint? Didn't know she did subtle." Harry quipped.

Giving his friend a dirty look, Ron muttered "She doesn't."

“Oh-ho!” Harry chuckled. “Don’t feel bad, mate. I think I got the same speech.”

From downstairs, Sirius’ voice boomed “POTTER! WEASLEY! MOVE YOUR SHABBY ARSES!!”

“Shabby never looked so good.” Ron declared.

Harry looked over his friend’s shoulder and said “S’not the Mirror of Erised, mate.” Then he ran.

“GIT!!!” Ron screamed, in hot pursuit.

The boys wrestled and tumbled over each other all the way down the steps.

“Look at you two!” Sirius scolded them. “Clothes a mess! Harry, a black eye! Episkey! Ron, a bloody, bloody nose! Episkey!”

They looked at each other, then at Sirius and sheepishly muttered “Sorry, Padfoot.”

“Don’t Padfoot me.” He scolded, but finally a smile broke out. “The James Look. Not fair... Not fair... Evanescio! There, all better. Well, except for Harry’s hair. But, that’s a lost cause, anyway. Let’s go then.”

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Sirius lived on the opposite side of London from Surrey. But, that didn’t matter to a wizard who could apparate. There was a small room in the church, invisible to Muggles, for wizards to pop in and out discretely. He side-alonged the boys. “Now, don’t forget, especially you Ron;” he said “While there will be quite a few witches and wizards, this is a Muggle affair.”

“Yes, Mum.” Ron groaned. Harry covered a laugh with a cough.



“I would not have believed it if I had not heard it with my own ears.” A voice behind Harry said “The notorious Sirius Black sounding all parental.”

Harry turned and greeted him with a warm handshake “Hi Remus. Madam Bones. Tonks.”

“No formality today, Harry.” She replied, smiling. She cast a look at Sirius.

Who stepped forward, said “As you wish.” And kissed her, soundly. Amelia’s right foot lifted off the ground.

“A...buu...errrr” Harry blabbered “Sirius!”

He pulled away and smirked “Really, Harry, I thought you’d already learned about that. It’s called kissing. It’s what two people do when---”

“I know what it is!” interrupted Harry.

Looking devious, Amelia asked “Sirius, dear, you mean you didn’t tell him?? What about the article in The Prophet?”

“Harry didn’t need to be exposed to that.” Sirius said, suddenly nervous. “Why don’t we get seated?”

Tonks patted his shoulder and said “Poor Cousin Sirius. Rita got him good.”

“Huh?” the still shell-shocked Harry grunted.

“Picked up a new nick-name, he did.” Offered Tonks.

Sirius growled at her “Tonks!”

“For shame, pranking your Godson this way.” She countered “Sorry, I didn’t bring a copy. The headline called him Bones’ Boy-Toy.”

For a moment, Harry looked ill, but then burst out laughing.

“How’d this get turned around on me?” grumbled Sirius.

“That, my dear Padfoot” Remus responded “would be my doing. Plans within plans and pranks within pranks.”

Harry leaned against a pew to hold himself up.

“Disgraceful behavior!” a female voice complained “We are well rid of you!”

A male voice added, pompously “Quite so, Mother. But, please don’t hold HIS presence against the Polkisses.”

“You stay on your side and I’ll stay on mine!” Harry snarled in low tones. “Just be glad I got advance warning you’d be here!”

Ron put a hand on his shoulder and said “Easy, mate.”

“I got this, Harry.” Said Sirius, almost jovially. “Actually been looking forward to this. You might have heard of me on the veletision a couple of years ago.”

Irritated, Harry’s uncle demanded “The WHAT?!”

“That’s TELEvision.” Amelia corrected.

Sirius gave a half-bow in acknowledgement of the correction and continued, with an evil glint in his eyes “Sorry --- as I was saying ---- Sirius Black at your service. Mass murderer and escaped convict at large.”

“Oh my!” Petunia Dursley squeaked “Y-you we-were th-the one----” she nearly fainted into Dudley’s arms.

Looking for support of some kind, Vernon addressed Amelia “Madam, you do not know what these people are! Help us raise the alarm!”

“That would be inadvisable, Mr. Dursley.” She replied “Those, such as yourselves, privileged to know of our world are responsible for keeping its secrets. Failure to do so can, depending on the severity of the offense, be dealt with most harshly.”

Vernon flinched “Yo-you’re one o-of th-them!” he stammered.

“Without false modesty” she confirmed “you might call me ‘The Boss’ of them. But, today, I am merely the proud Auntie of the happy groom. I know the Polkisses made you aware of Harry’s presence here today, so acting shocked is useless. I will further mention there are more than a dozen Magical folk present, and not all of them are on the groom side of the aisle. Now, Paula’s family invited you. Celebrate their daughter’s happiness. There is enough of a crowd for you and Harry to avoid each other.”

Harry recognized that tone of voice. It was the one he’d heard from Professor McGonagall. The conversation was quite over. He looked around, and for the first time, noticed that there were a number of familiar faces. Professor Sprout waved at him as she entered the church. Considering her usual attire, she looked remarkably Muggle. ‘Cat Lady’ Figg was also there, chatting with some other Privet Dr. neighbors. At the rear of the church were a man and a couple of women he remembered from the Department of Mysteries Battle, though not their names.

“Well, that was fun.” Commented Ron, sarcastically.

Harry felt like slapping him upside the head, but the organ music started, announcing the start of the ceremony. Everyone still standing quickly found seats.

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The men entered through the side door wearing blue and white. The wedding party was slightly unusual in that the bride’s family supplied the men, while the groom’s family supplied the women. The exception was Frank’s best man, who wore the uniform of a Royal Navy Commander.

Harry had to refrain from glaring at Piers Polkiss who, seemingly just to torment him, had been paired with Susan. 'They coulda put him with Tina' he thought. There was, however, a boy about Tina's age in the party. Harry didn't know if the boy was some cousin, or a younger brother he'd just never seen. Of course, Frank was the center of attention. Especially of female attention. A stray memory of eleven year old Ginny staring at him crossed his mind. To shake that off, he asked Ron "Hey, where's Hermione?"

"Late." Ron sniggered "Couldn't believe it meself until I saw some poor sap trailing behind. Man, if this wasn't a church...ohh...I can hear her now... I can not believe you made me late! ---"

Harry slapped his friend's chest, then briefly shook hands with Frank Bones as he passed. The organ music changed and first a flower girl, then a ring bearer came in from the back of the church. Hannah Abbott, who was as much a part of the Bones family as her own, was the first bridesmaid. She puckered up as she passed and made Ron blush faintly.

"God, Ron!" Harry groaned "How long you two been dating?"

Ron gave him a chilly look and replied "Bugger off, Potter!"

"Now, now, Ronald." Harry countered, imitating Hermione "Not in a church."

Ron's payback came down next, as Tina Bones entered. Susan's sister waved at Harry and giggled when he waved back. "Still got 10-year olds chasing ya, Harry?" he commented

"She's not ten." Argued Harry "She's eleven."

Ron almost strangled himself to keep from bursting out "Oh that's so much better!"

"Shuttup, Ron." Harry replied. His friend's retort went unheard as Susan walked down the aisle. She looked more beautiful than in his

dream. Summer meant thin material for the dresses, AND a display of cleavage.

Susan Bones, as had been said by many, was well above average in intelligence. But, it didn't take a genius to figure out that her boyfriend was a fanatical 'breast man' Just a couple of early snogging sessions had firmly established that. No Harry for the last six weeks meant her summer homework was long done. And it frustrated her no end that he had to return three days before her brother's wedding. Hence, the last minute dress alteration. As she passed his pew, she whispered "Something wrong, luv?"

"Nuttin!" replied Harry, tightly

She laughed softly and continued down the aisle, briefly adding a spring to her step. This caused a slight sway in her chest.

"Witch!" he exclaimed, just loud enough for her. It was difficult to restrain himself from scratching his crotch. "Ooohh! She's so gonna get it!"

Ron gave him a disgusted look and commented "Too much info, mate."

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The Polkiss family were devoted Roman Catholics. Frank cared little, if at all, about religion. So the ceremony was a traditional Catholic one, mixing the wedding ceremony with a Mass.

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Harry couldn't quite shake the feeling something was going to happen. Everything was going along perfectly. The Maid of Honor walked down the aisle. And, then the Bride herself glowing with happiness, escorted by her father. Throughout the ceremony, he fingered his wand nervously.

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“Do you Francis Robert Bones” the priest asked “take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife? To love, honor and cherish as long as you both shall live?”

Frank’s joyous response echoed through the church “I do!”

“Do you Paula Patricia Polkiss” the priest turned to the bride “take this man to be your lawful wedded husband? To love, honor and cherish as long as you both shall live?”

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“Gotta thing for Ps, don’t they?” Ron whispered to Harry.

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Her heels meant the bride actually looked down slightly. “Who’d a thought crashing into a tree would lead to the happiest day in my life?”

“Umm...the vow...” the priest prompted.

After an embarrassed giggle, Paula replied “Sorry, Father. I do...wholeheartedly.”

“Then...by the power vested in me by our divine Savior...I now pronounce you man and wife. What God has joined, let no man tear asunder.” He declared “Francis, you may kiss your bride.”

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Harry still glanced around anxiously. He couldn’t believe something he was a part of was going off without disaster striking.

“Would you relax, mate!” Ron whispered, harshly.

Harry hissed back “I can’t!”

“By Merlin’s Beard...if you bloody don’t sit still...I’ll petrify your sorry arse!” Ron threatened “You’re making ME nervous!”

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“It is my privilege and honor to present, for the first time, Mr. and Mrs. Frank Bones.” The priest said. And, ending both the Mass and the Wedding, added “Go in peace.”

The congregation replied “Amen.”

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“See?” whispered Ron.

Harry couldn’t help rolling his eyes, but he was glad to have been wrong. He watched the wedding party file out. Neither of the Bones girls seemed entirely happy. Susan flashed him a definite grimace. Impatiently, he waited as the priest left ‘Why do they have to drag it out!’

In this case, Ron was in complete agreement with his friend. While the two teens had enjoyed their ‘boy time’ over the last few days, they had begun to get on each others’ nerves. When, finally, people began emptying the pews he growled “About bloody time!”

“HARRY! RON!” yelled Hermione. She waved her hands wildly and violently hugged Harry. “You look great! How was Nicolas Flamel? Did he have a lot of books!?”

He returned the hug, then pried her loose, complaining “Rather used to breathing!”

“Sorry.” She said with a blush, then greeted Ron, though less enthusiastically. The former couple was mostly back to their pre-dating friendship, but were still not huggers. Remembering her date, she said “Oh, sorry, David these are my two closest friends at my boarding school. Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley. David and I live in the same neighborhood.”

Use of boarding school told the boys that her date was a Muggle. To Harry, that was a definite plus. At least David's glance at his scar was only mild curiosity. He shook hands.

"Always wondered where she disappeared to every September." commented David "Your school doesn't even have a website. I looked. How does it get by?"

Ron's confused look set off alarms between Harry and Hermione, so he immediately steered Ron away "Come on, mate, let's go see the girls before they have to leave." he said "See you at the reception."

"So that's the weasel kid, huh?" asked David as he contemplated their backs. "Don't think much of him."

Hermione punched his arm and snapped "Need I remind you that he is barely a year younger than you. And Ronald was a friend long before he and I dated."

"Easy, Hermy, easy." David said in a tone of surrender.

In response she gave him a cold, steely glare and warned "If I start hearing THAT I will blame you."

"Eh!" he shrugged "I'm quaking in my shoes. Now, let's get to the party. I'm hungry."

Hermione rolled her eyes and followed.



## 40 – The Reception

Parish property was very large and included a separate hall. Guests simply walked across the parking lot. Sirius, in the company of Remus and Tonks, joined up with Harry and Ron. This was fortunate because it thoroughly intimidated the Durleys, who steered away from the group.

“Got someone for you to meet, Harry.” His Godfather said brightly. “Hey! BOBBY!”

A less than pleased man in a black tuxedo walked over, grumbling “Didn’t we already talk about proper respect for your superior officer.”

“Yah, yah, I’m quaking in my shoes. Only because I had a twelve year vacation.” Sirius countered, dismissively, then introduced them “Anywho, Rob Sharpe, my Godson Harry.”

Flashing a grin, he offered his hand and said “It is a real pleasure. Now...let me see...most redheads today are Bones. But, that’d mean you’re out of place. It’s safe to assume you’re a wizard. That’d make you either a Weasley or a Prewett...no...both. Yep, one of the best Auror teams of the century, your uncles. Well, both of you are legends already. You pointed out major holes in our security believe you me. Paid a heavy price, though.”

“Rob’s sister, Minerva, was killed by that witch with Voldemort.” explained Sirius. He wasn’t exactly pleased with the way the subject had come up, but he couldn’t find it in his heart to rebuke his friend.

Harry, predictably, looked away with a guilty expression and muttered “I’m sorry, sir.”

“ Never blame yourself for doing the right thing.” The Auror countered, gruffly. “Look at me!”

Flinching, Harry obeyed “Yessir.”

“I am proud of my sister.” Rob said “And, frankly, a bit jealous. Death in battle should be every Auror’s ambition and much desired end.”

Ron shook his head as the Auror left and melted into the crowd “Bloody hell!” she exclaimed “That bloke’s mental!”

“He calls it dedicated.” said Sirius.

Harry snorted slightly and added “Tripe!”

“Don’t let HIM hear you say that.” Sirius warned. But, he didn’t dispute either boy’s evaluation. “Rob’s wife says he likes battle more than sex. I know which I choose!”

Harry’s face twisted in disgust “That’s way too much information, Sirius.” He complained “There has to be some law that prevents your Godfather from dating your girlfriend’s aunt.”

“I believe there is.” Lupin said, authoritatively, drawing stares “Let me see --- hmm... Section Nine – Paragraph Six - ...ahhh... Either Sub-paragraph d or e ... But the senior couple has first claim. Sorry, Harry.”

Harry thought for a minute, paled, then exclaimed “BUGGER THAT!!”

“Shame you on, Remus!” Tonks exclaimed.

Lupin’s mouth twitched and Harry’s fell open “You’re having me on?!”

“I seem to have lost my ability to keep a straight face.” Lupin said while laughing.

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Seating had been arranged to mix the wedded couple’s families and friends. The Dursleys sat among two tables of neighbors from Privet Drive. But, their table was directly behind the groom’s grandparents. Hermione shot Harry and Ron a displeased look as she sat back to

back with Vernon. Naturally, the head table was for the wedding party. And next to that was a table for both sets of parents.

Harry mouthed a sympathetic 'Sorry' to his second favorite girl. He and Ron were at a mixed table of teens. There were a couple Polkiss cousins and a girl that made Harry's jaw drop. It wasn't that she was not pretty. She was -- very much so.

"What's wrong with your friend?" she asked.

Ron shook the offered hand. He, too, was surprised but not speechless "Ron Weasley," he introduced himself "nice to...ahhh... meet you."

"Er...hi..." stammered Harry. His head twisted around to the still empty head table. "You're ...umm... not Sue?" Except for blond hair, the girl could have been a twin of his girlfriend. She even wore Susan's preferred plaited hairstyle.

"Ickle Suzy's not sneaky enough." she observed "Must be Tina's handiwork. I imagine you're Harry Potter."

He nodded and replied "Yeah."

"Suzy's letters gave the impression you were bright." She added, shaking her head "One syllable answers ... States the obvious ... Oh well, at least you're cute."

Ron sniggered, enjoying his friend's discomfort. "You do look an awful lot like her." He offered.

"Actually, Suzy looks like me, as I am older. And, since you asked, I'm Shirley Marrow." She replied, first addressing Ron, then turning to Harry. "Been wondering what my little cousin sees in you. How about you sit beside me and we'll talk?"

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Susan Bones had a patient disposition, but her escort in the wedding party was really getting under her skin. Piers Polkiss kept making semi-subtle snide remarks about her boyfriend. No one comment was especially bad, but the boy kept at it. She endured it for her brother's sake.

"I wish that berk was a wizard so I could hex his arse!" exclaimed Tina after assuring they were alone in the bathroom.

Susan made a half-amused, half-frustrated noise and patted her sister's shoulder. "I know how you feel." She sympathized "I'm not doing any better. I would love to give Piers a faceful of furnunculus boils. But—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know...Secrecy Statutes." Tina sighed "But, so help me! If Paulus Polkiss pulls my ponytail one more time! Merlin! That's way too many Ps."

Susan laughed at her sister's observation, thought a moment, then gave a shifty look. "Well..I.. Il ... in honor of the Ps... might I suggest pounding your peds on his penis?"

"Huh?" the younger girl asked, blushing at the reference.

Susan giggled and replied "In other words...give him a good swift kick where it hurts."

"That would be mean." replied Tina, with a smirk.

Susan threw her head back and laughed "Get that look off your face! You don't want Ron calling you Ferret Girl! Now, how do I look?"

"Like you want someone to jump your bones." Tina teased.

It was the older girl's turn to blush. Susan was completely stumped for a response, but got out of it as the music ended and the emcee began the introductions. "Come on, let's go." She said with older sister authority.

“Well, sexier than ever!” commented her escort.

Susan kept a neutral expression and replied “Thank you Piers. But, do remember, I have a boyfriend. One YOU spent most of your time terrorizing.”

“Hmpf! Potter!” Piers snorted, dismissively. “I’m ten times the man he is.” They had put their arms around each other’s backs, but he let his move lower.

The emcee had just finished announcing Tina and flipped his cue card “Next up...please give a warm welcome to the groom’s oldest sister and the bride’s oldest brother Susan Bones and Piers Polkiss!”

“Do that again and you’ll really regret it!” growled Susan. She was shocked when she felt his hand on her ass. But, shock didn’t slow her reaction. Magic wasn’t an option under the circumstances, so she dug her nails into the offending hand.

Clutching his bleeding hand, Piers cursed “Bitch! That hurt!”

“Not quite, but close.” commented Susan, a rare sneer darkened her face. A smile replaced the wicked look as she grabbed the injured hand and wrapped it around her arm. She told him “Now smile for the crowd.”

Pulled along, Piers had no choice but to obey “Potter’s welcome to you!” he declared, gritting his teeth against the pain. And a smiling pair crossed the reception hall. Piers felt a minor sense of victory that blood was getting on her dress sleeve.

“Who the bloody hell is that!” Susan muttered to herself as she spotted Harry. She couldn’t help the spike of jealousy that hit her at the sight of a blond girl playfully slapping her boyfriend’s shoulder. Then, she saw Harry’s face, which was a picture of confusion. And she recognized her ‘twin’ and laughed.

“Looks like Harry has a new girlfriend.” Hannah quipped.

Susan poked her friend in the ribs as she took her place at the head table and growled "Bite me!"

Tina giggled.

"This was your doing, Christina." Susan accused her sister "You handled the seating arrangements."

Tina pressed a finger to her lips and said "Hush, they're gonna announce Frank."

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After the newlyweds made their appearance, meals were brought out. Glaring at his nephew, Vernon Dursley muttered to his wife "I would think we deserve better seats than the boy."

"You heard what the groom's Aunt said." Petunia cautioned "She is one of THEM. Clearly, they prefer the company of their own."

Hermione Granger, with her excellent hearing, caught most of it and listened for more.

"Irrelevant, as I see it." Vernon continued to grumble "It is a matter of rank and appearance. I shall most certainly discuss this with Polkiss."

Petunia placed a restraining hand on her husband's massive chest as he started to stand. "Don't cause a scene, Vernon." she warned "Show that we are the better people."

"Better people indeed!" Hermione hissed under her breath. She returned her attention to her date and the others at her table which meant she missed what would have been a fascinating connection.

To pull her husband's attention away from 'the boy' Petunia struck up a conversation with the tall lean black man next to her. "I am Petunia Dursley." She introduced herself "We are neighbors of the Polkisses,

might I ask how you come to know the family?"

"Dean Thomas Jr." the man replied "and my son Dean III. And my wife Janis. Actually, I met Frank at a train station by chance. He is a brilliant mechanic. I am rather hoping to tempt him out of the car garage and onto one of the North Sea oil rigs."

Petunia had frowned slightly at the mention of a connection with the 'freak' side. But, she immediately lit up at the mention of such an opportunity. "Vernon! Did you hear that?" she exclaimed "Mr. Thomas is connected with the oil business!"

"And, what is your interest, Mrs. Dursley?" the black man inquired.

Petunia simpered "Oh! Not me, sir. I know nothing of business! It is my husband you should talk to."

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"I hope everyone has enjoyed their meal!" the emcee announced. The hall lights dimmed and a spotlight lit the man. "Time to start the festivities! Let's kick them off with the traditional bride and groom dance! Might I have the happy couple to center stage please!"

Harry applauded with the rest of the guests as the happy couple twirled around the dance floor. He liked Susan's brother. And, in spite of getting off wrong due to their early history, he was on good terms with Paula.

There was a string of other traditional dances: Paula with Mr. Polkiss and Frank with Mrs. Bones, Mr. Bones with Mrs. Polkiss. Then Frank with danced his new Mother-in-law and Paula with her new Father-in-law. And so on.

Harry had mixed feelings as the full wedding party danced together. Partly, he was in a rush to have the song end so he could dance with his deliciously dressed girlfriend. But, almost as badly, he wanted to

throttle Piers Polkiss. The music finally ended, he saw the pair shoot each other dirty looks.

“Yiicck!” Susan cringed as she approached Harry “I am not dancing with anyone else named Polkiss!”

Harry frowned, demanding “What’d he do? I’ll kill him!”

“I’ll help.” Ron added, eagerly.

Hannah Abbott grabbed her boyfriend and dragged him onto the dance floor.

“Now, I’m going to tell you what Piers did.” Susan said, calmly “And then, I’ll tell you my response. Then, you can relax. Deal?”

Harry kept a tight rein on his newly learned abilities. With a momentary slip, he’d stunned Sirius right through his Occlumency. Nicolas Flamel had warned him that his mind was now a weapon. Harry’s effort to control himself only made him glare at his childhood tormentor more resentfully.

“... so, see” Susan was saying “no reason for you to get all heated...”

“Wha?” Harry gave her a confused look and realized he hadn’t heard a thing she had said.

Looking mildly annoyed, she said “Well, if you’d rather stare at Piers...”

“Of course not.” replied Harry. And, yet another little surprise presented itself. He knew he hadn’t paid attention to Susan’s story, yet he remembered it, completely. It was as if another part of his brain had recorded the whole thing. An interesting side affect of Flamel’s training. He kissed her lightly and said “Just enjoying his pain. Shall we dance?”



Susan snuggled up to him and replied "Let's." She slid her hands into Harry's jacket and up his back.

"The last couple of days have driven me crazy." he complained. "And this dress!"

She leaned back slightly and shrugged "Oh! You like?"

"Yeah!" he exclaimed as he tightened his arms around her waist. Then, he kissed her again. This time more heatedly. There were several more slow songs during which Harry and Susan refused to part. Later partners included Ron, Mr. Bones and Frank for Susan. Harry danced with Tina, Mrs. Bones, Hermione and the popular cousin Shirley.

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Currently dancing with Harry was Pomona Sprout. Though a pureblood and not usually among Muggles, her natural friendliness had served her well today. "And I must say, you're a graceful dancer Harry." she complimented.

"That's mostly due to Professor McGonagall." he admitted, a little bashfully "The Yule Ball...didn't want to step on my date's toes."

The Herbology Professor nodded "I find myself wanting to ask the same question for two very different reasons. I do not, for obvious reasons, display my close relationship with Susan openly ... at Hogwarts. And, in my role as a Head of House, I also feel the need to ensure that there are no further incidents between yourself and Miss Weasley."

"I understand what you're asking, Professor." Harry said, with a little chill in his tone "And I don't think there'll be any more fights with Ginny."

She caught the tone but persisted "I would like to know if you making peace with Miss Weasley would impact your relationship with Susan."

“Please excuse me, Professor” he said, pulling away “I need to go to the bathroom.” Frustrated and annoyed, Harry covered the white lie making his way down the corridor to the lavatories. ‘I think I’ve bloody proven myself!’ he thought.

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“Again Big D! AGAIN!!” cheered Piers Polkiss.

\*Cough\* \*GAG\* “Please, let me go!” a girl cried \*Splutter\*

Dudley Dursley slapped his victim on the back of the head and ordered “Shaddup bitch! You’re paying for what your sister did to Piers!”

“Come on guys! Cut it out!” a younger voice protested “Let’er go!”

Piers snarled angrily and said “Just hold the sodding door! If you don’t...so help me...You’re next!”

“Someone’s trying to come in!” Paul Polkiss yelled.

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Harry heard loud voices, but they barely penetrated his awareness. What did was that he couldn’t open the door. After two pushes he reared back and slammed his body into the door. “Piers! What’re you--”

“HARRY! (gurgles) HELP ME!!” Tina screamed

Charging around, he pushed past Piers and saw Dudley holding Tina Bones upside down over a toilet. The girl’s hair was disheveled and half soaked. Parts of her dress were torn. Harry was so stunned by the sight, he didn’t react in time to avoid a punch in the jaw.

“Look he’s crying!” Dudley laughed “Hit him again, Piers!”

The punch was one of those roundhouse swings, completely telegraphed. It wouldn't have caught Harry even before his time with Flamel. With the combination of his new mind and physique, Harry didn't dodge. He caught Piers' wrist and twisted "Let Tina go, Dudley!" he demanded, harshly.

"Owww!" whimpered Piers "That hurts Potter! Lemme go!"

Tina cried out again and Dudley shook her roughly "Brat!" he shouted "You heard him Potter! Turn Piers loose! --- Do it! Do it or the little bitch goes for another swim!"

"NOOooo!" screamed Tina as she was lowered toward the bowl again.

Harry bore down on the captured arm and threatened "No way! Let Tina go or I'll break it!"

"Please let him go." the younger Polkiss pleaded.

Harry growled at him "Stay out of it!"

"You wouldn't dare." Dudley declared "You don't have the stones."

Harry thought for a moment, then said "Oh really."

There was a sickening crunch and Piers howled in agony. He tried to cradle his broken wrist.

But, Harry ruthlessly grabbed his arm at the elbow and twisted it around his back. "Well, Piers," he whispered "Your elbow's next, then your shoulder, then your oth---"

"NO MORE! NO MORE !!" Piers begged "Dudley! Turn her loose!"

Dudley panicked and dropped Tina.

Harry shoved Piers into the tiled wall and grabbed his cousin, ripping the silk shirt "Touch her again and you're dead." Harry declared

“Touch anyone I love and you will die. And just so you remember---” he punched Dudley square in the eye. He drew back to hit Dudley again.

Tina was curled up in the stall. Her sides ached. Her head hurt, both from the slaps and from blood rushing into it. She did not want to seem weak in front of Harry, but the tears just started.

“Bugger off Dursley!” Harry cursed. He pushed his cousin into the Piers boys and went to the sobbing girl. “Come on Tina, let me get you out of there.”

Shaking her disheveled head, Tina sobbed and tried to push him away “Go’way Harry.” she blubbered.

“Not a chance.” he replied. Grabbing her hands, Harry pulled Tina to her feet and picked her up. He felt her legs around his waist. He stood easily, supporting her weight with one arm and rubbing her back with the other.

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“He’s crazy!” yelled Dudley Dursley as he ran back to the main hall “Potter broke Piers’ arm!”

The bride’s oldest brother was cradling his right arm which had a massive purple bruise all around the wrist and another, less colored one, at the elbow. “It true!” he cried “He’s got the little blond girl!”

“And what were you doing?!” Susan demanded. At that moment, she had already been irritated and was heatedly defending Harry “I can think of one good reason for him to break your arm, Piers!”

The shouting quickly attracted attention from the rest of the guests.

“All you had to do was keep your distance!” Paula yelled at her brother.

Mr. Polkiss scowled at his daughter "It is beyond me why you continue to defend that miscreant."

"Harry's better than you'll ever be." Susan fired back, defensively. Then she turned on Piers "But, he gave me his word he wouldn't go after you. So, what did you do?"

Dudley bumped her bodily, then pushed her.

Mrs. Polkiss fussed over her son "We'll have to get you to hospital at once."

"Push my sister again, fatty, and I'll break both your arms." Frank threatened. He clamped a hand on Dudley's neck and squeezed.

Petunia protested "You let my son go you bully!"

"I have never hit a woman before, Mrs. Dursley." Frank said "Back off, or I might change that." He shoved Dudley into his mother.

"And where, precisely is Tina?" Mr. Bones demanded.

Piers looked up from his injured arm and replied "In the bathroom, Potter's got her trapped."

"Stupid Muggle!" exclaimed Ron. He was quickly silenced by several angry looks.

Susan gave an annoyed snort "Look everyone!" she snapped "No way Harry would hurt Tina. I'll just go---"

"We will go." Neil interrupted "Frank, you too."

The groom nodded "Yessir."

"Fine, whatever," she said, impatiently and turned on her heels, heading down the passage to the lavatories.

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'I'm useless with crying girls' Harry thought. That had certainly been true last year when Cho Chang dragged him into Hogsmeade. For lack of anything else, he suggested "Why don't I help you clean up?"

"O (sob) K" agreed Tina "Thank you for helping me, Harry."

With a twinge of guilt, he replied "Well, Dudley is my cousin. And it's not the first time those two have picked on smaller kids."

"I can't believe you broke Piers' arm!" she exclaimed.

Harry shrugged "I'd do it again in a minute." he said "The only thing I regret is I didn't get to break Dudley's."

"Do you really love me, Harry?" asked Tina. Having been raised in a loving home, the concept of siding against her family was beyond the young girl's experience. Of course, no one in her family would act like a bully.

Harry was momentarily at a loss for how to answer the question. The words had spilled out in reaction to the situation. He had never really considered how he felt about Susan's sister. "Yes...I guess I do" he replied, thoughtfully "... as a sister...maybe. How does that sound?"

"Alright." Tina replied, brightly. Then, she frowned thoughtfully and asked "So, is Suzy your sister, too?"

Harry shivered at the thought "Ahh...no" he said "I definitely do not think of Sue as a sister."

"Mum tells me not to make faces like that, or it'll get stuck." Tina said, giggling.

Harry glared at her for a moment, then laughed too "Very funny." he said with a touch of sarcasm, then "Well, you're all fixed up. We have to tell your parents about this."

"Don' wanna." replied Tina, grumpily.

Harry put a comforting hand on her shoulder and said "Yeah, I know, but trust me not telling is worse. If you don't, Dudley and Piers will get away with it. And your parents won't let them, like their parents used to with me."

"Awright!" the girl muttered "Let's get it over with!"

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As the bathroom door opened, Susan intercepted him with a hug. "You were very sweet, Harry." she said.

"Err...thanks." he replied.

Tina ran to Neil and wrapped herself around his waist. "DADDY!"

"From what we heard, we can guess what happened. But, I am afraid we will need all the details. Dudley and Piers made some --- shall we say --- provocative accusations." said Frank. The groom was torn. He was deeply relieved that his youngest sister was apparently unharmed. It was obvious to him that Harry had saved Tina from some trouble, and it made him want to tear someone apart. Unfortunately, one of the main suspects was his new wife's brother.

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Tina quickly related the entire incident: Of how Piers and Dudley forced her into the men's room and shoved her around between them. She honestly reported the minor role of the younger Polkiss boy. Quite distressed, Susan confirmed that she had, indeed, scratched Piers.

"You're gonna get it now, Potter!" Dudley proclaimed loudly.

All Neil Bones saw was red. It took all his years of mild temperament to keep from pulling his wand. The generally non-violent man roared and charged. In seconds he had pounded Dudley to the ground and

was repeatedly punching the crying boy in the face. It took five people, including Frank, to pull him off.

“ALL OF YOU ARE INSANE FREAKS!” Petunia Dursley screeched. “YOU AND YOUR POWERS AND WANDS AND---“

There were apparently more Aurors in attendance than Tonks and the one Sirius had introduced. Harry watched in stunned silence as every Muggle (except for the Dursleys and Paula) in the room were Obliviated.

“I am a senior law enforcement official.” Madam Bones announced to the dazed crowd “Dudley Dursley and Piers Polkiss are under arrest. Charged with assault, at least for now. Unfortunately, Neil, you as well. Harry---”

Sirius gaped at her “Amelia! You cannot possibly!”

“I am not arresting Harry, Sirius.” she cut him off “I need a statement.”

Sheepishly, Sirius replied “Oh, sorry.”

“Sharpe!” Amelia called to the nearest Auror “You’ll take these two into custody.”

He saluted and replied “Yes, Director.”

“Muggle custody.” she emphasized.

The Auror looked disappointed, but repeated “Yes, Director.”

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“Bloody awful way to end a party.” Frank muttered, looking sadly at his wife.

Paula nodded nervously “We can’t let this affect our marriage.” she said.



“Let the system find out the truth.” Frank suggested “Neither of us was there, so we really don’t know what happened. Though, if your brother hurt Tina, I’ll---”

Joan Bones cut her son off “Francis!” and approached the newlyweds “The two of you make a wonderful couple. Go. Enjoy your honeymoon. Paula’s parents spent quite a bit on those cruise tickets. Whatever the outcome, will probably be decided before you even return. And, overbearing mother-in-law that I am, I forbid you from fighting about it and order you to make your farewells to Paula’s parents.”

“Thanks Mum” said Frank “I was all set to pop off.” he kissed his mother and hugged her tightly.

Joan fussed over him and tugged on his tuxedo jacket. “I am very proud of you.” she said between sniffles.

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Meanwhile, Madam Bones was indulging in a moment of enjoyment in the middle of the mess that had become of her nephew’s wedding. “Auror Black, you’re with me.” she ordered.

“Alright.” a somewhat confused Sirius replied as he fell into step beside her.

Vernon Dursley spotted the approaching woman and flew into a rage “HOW DARE YOU KIDNAP MY SON, FREAK?!” he roared.

“Silencio!” cast Amelia. Her wand was drawn and hidden again in a flash. “It is attitudes such as yours that keep our world hidden, Dursley.” she lectured, then Amelia turned a harsh glare on Harry’s aunt and said “Petunia Dursley, you are under arrest for knowingly violating the Secrecy Statutes. Auror Black, take her to a holding cell at the Ministry. I’ll be along to file charges.”

Sirius was delighted with the assignment. He grabbed the protesting woman by the arm, dragged her around the nearest corner and, without warning, disappeared.

“You will receive an owl when the trial date is set, Dursley. It will include Portkey transportation.” she informed Harry’s uncle. Madam Bones wasn’t especially concerned if Vernon understood what she meant. With another quick wave of her wand, she cancelled the Silencing Spell and walked off.

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Harry had watched on from a distance with a certain malicious delight as Sirius took Petunia away. “Couldn’t happen to a nicer person.” he chuckled “Hey, Hannah, what’s the punishment for breaking the Secrecy Statutes?”

“It depends.” the blond girl replied “For a Muggle, usually the maximum is 30 days. Most times, it’s just a fine.”

Harry gave a careless shrug and said “Eh...it’ll do.”

“Boy, I hope Bill’s wedding is quieter.” Ron commented.

Hannah put an arm around his waist and said “Well, I can’t say I like your Mother, but you might try to make peace with her. It could help.”

“Hmpf.” Ron grunted.

Hannah kissed him softly “I almost think you got mis-sorted, Ron.” she said “But, really...how about an agree to disagree---”

“We’ll see.” he grumbled.

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Meanwhile, Hermione was having problems of her own. “What was that, David!?” she snapped.

“They are all worthless.” her date repeated “Can’t you see that? Potter broke that one kid’s arm. He’s nasty to his own relatives and---”

She shot him an icy look “You really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“And the redhead...” he continued “He’s----”

Hermione cut him off “My friendship with Ron is none of your business.” she said, coldly.

“Neither is how you get home.” he retorted and stalked off.

Hermione fingered her wand for a second, strongly tempted to hex him “That is it!” she growled “I have had it with men!”

“I swore them off years ago.” Susan’s ‘twin’ cousin said. “Need a lift home?”

Hermione recognized her quite readily and shrugged “I would appreciate it. Thank you, Shirley.”

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“Madam Bones, I’m sorry about the trouble.” a guilty sounding Harry offered “I didn’t mean to disrupt the reception.”

Susan was about to speak, but Amelia cut in “Don’t be silly, Harry. None of this was in any way your fault. What I need is for you to give me every detail you can remember. Then we’ll see if any of it needs to be edited for the sake of the Muggle Police...Ahh...Would you have any problem testifying against your cousin?”

“You’re kidding, right?” he laughed “I hate him as much as Malfoy.”

Amelia didn’t react openly to the comment; she replied “You should, perhaps, not mention that when questioned by the police.”

“Are Muggle police stations very different from Aurors, Auntie?” asked Susan.

Amelia shook her head “Basically, no. But, remember, don’t---”

“---make any magic comments.” Susan finished “Of course, Auntie.”

Swatting her niece on the shoulder, Amelia ordered “In the car.”

“My dear.” Harry said with a courtly bow and held out his hand. Susan curtsied and allowed him to help her into the back. He climbed in next to her. Madam Bones got into the driver’s seat and they headed off.

Up next is my other summer wedding. Bill & Fleur's

## 41 – Wedding at the Burrow

Harry's statement was instrumental in Dudley and Piers being charged with assault. And it was fully supported by Tina Bones when she was questioned. The pair were arrested, photographed, and fingerprinted. They were released on bail and a trial was scheduled for the end of August. The date happened to be a few days before Frank and Paula were to return from their honeymoon. The younger Polkiss boy, Paul, was not charged. That Harry had broken Piers' arm was ruled as self defense. The court decided not to pursue charges against Mr. Bones for his pounding of Dudley. Vernon had been furious.

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"You know, Ron" Harry was saying as they were getting ready "you don't need to keep fighting with your Mother over me."

The taller, red-haired boy sighed frustratedly and complained "We've been through this a hundred times, Harry. Yeah, it started out with you, but it's way past that. You and Ginny made peace, well more or less. But she just wouldn't shut up! She totally bought into that Rita article after you two vanished. You heard Dad the other day."

"Oh yeah." Harry replied. But, no matter who said what, he couldn't help feeling partially responsible for his friend's on-going pain. "Any word on your sister?"

Ron shrugged "Not since yesterday. But Trelawney did do an Unbreakable with Dad. And you know what those things are like. I still think she's a quack. So does Hermione."

"You two agreeing." Harry commented with a chuckle "Who'd'a thought it?"

In response, Ron punched his arm.

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At about the same time, Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones were also preparing for the Weasley wedding. Two weddings in as many weeks, with completely different outfits, was very trying. The pair was rather relieved they had no responsibilities in this wedding. Though, Hannah did have to watch her boyfriend dancing with another girl.

“Payback, he called it.” the blond girl huffed.

The redhead laughed derisively and groaned “Poor baby!”

“Stop bickering you two! And snap it up!” Madam Bones ordered. For convenience, the two families had opted to stay at a hotel in town and simply walk to the Burrow. It minimized the portkey and floo traffic. The Bones clan was, of course, minus Paula and Frank who were on an extended honeymoon.

After a continental breakfast, the group consisting of Hannah, her parents and Amelia, Susan, Tina, Joan and Neil set off. Leaving two hours before the ceremony gave them plenty of time.

“I just hope that woman doesn’t create another scene like the one in Diagon Alley.” said Joan during their walk.

Everyone knew she was talking about Mrs. Weasley’s very public argument with Ron after he had testified at Susan’s trial. “Now, dear” Neil said mildly “I am quite certain Molly will have other things to worry about. And if not, we can certainly be the bigger people. Thank you for inviting us. My, what lovely decorations. Fleur, your dress is wonderful.”

“And if she’s not, she’ll be sorry!” Tina declared, cracking her knuckles. As yet, despite her early introduction to Hogwarts, the blond Bones was still wandless.

Joan took the comment to heart, warning her daughter “None of your pranks, young lady.” It had been a very long summer at the Bones house. Hogwarts’ substitute Potion Mistress had been tremendously proud of her youngest girl’s performance. Admittedly, she hadn’t passed every final, but she didn’t have to. Joan’s one problem with

Tina was how the oldest Weasley students had taken to her, and she to them.

“We have something of a bone to pick with that woman as well.” said Mr. Abbott “Frankly, she should be kissing Harry Potter’s feet after the justice that was meted out on the girl’s behalf. But, that aside, she will be more respectful towards my daughter.”

Hannah put in “Ron and I can handle her, Dad. It’s one of the reasons he’s been staying with Mr. Black.”

“The point, sweetie, is that you shouldn’t have to. Leave this to us.” Mrs. Abbott said.

It wasn’t looking good for Molly Weasley, and the wedding had not even begun. In fact, guests had only started to show up at The Burrow.

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Meanwhile, a long running investigation had finally borne fruit. Months had gone by with no promising leads. Then, an anonymous tip had taken the investigator in a new direction. He put all the pieces, plus witnesses, together. Then, for a solid hour, sat unmoving at his desk, thinking. Reluctantly, he then sought out Sr. Auror Moody who was in charge of the department for the day.

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“Professor Sprout! Professor Flitwick!” Harry called out to the first people he saw after coming out of the Weasley fireplace. One area he was definitely grateful for Nicolas Flamel’s training was that he no longer spilled out of the Floo Network.

The Conjuring Professor was not fully human and would have attracted unwanted attention at Frank Bones’ wedding. However, nothing would have made him miss one of his favorite students getting married. Bill Weasley had been one of the best students to ever come through the school. It took raw power, drive and

knowledge to be a Cursebreaker. In the current generation of students, the diminutive teacher had only thought Cedric Diggory had the right combination of traits. No one in the incoming Seventh Year would be a Cursebreaker. Among the Sixth Years-to-be, Hermione Granger had the knowledge and to spare, but lacked the raw power. Ron Weasley had the power, but not the drive. And, Filius had doubted Harry Potter would ever accumulate the knowledge. But, then he dueled the Headmaster to a draw.

“I apologize if I seemed insensitive, Harry.” Professor Sprout said sincerely. “All I can say is, I meant well at Frank’s wedding.”

For a moment, Harry looked confused, he had honestly forgotten. Now he didn’t feel so much as a flicker of annoyance. “Apology accepted, Professor.” he replied “I think I overreacted a bit at the time.”

“You seem to have changed.” she observed “You are more ...relaxed... I suppose. Mature would be a good word as well. Have you had a good summer?”

Harry blushed a bit from the praise. Of all the Hogwarts professors, after the wild twists of last year, he’d come to like the Head of Hufflepuff the most. “Well...I don’t know if you could call it a good summer...exactly.” he replied “Definitely different...Nicolas was ...like ...no one I’ve ever met.”

“In what way?” asked Pomona. She had always wondered about the historical figure.

Harry looked at the growing crowd, hesitated, and replied “Uhh....sorry Professor...with so many people around. It’s not that I mind talking to you. I just really don’t---”

“Mr. Flamel values his privacy, is that what you’re saying?” she asked.

Harry brightened to that “Exactly.” he answered with a grin. “Besides, I’m not sure anyone would believe me anyway.”



“Hmm...intriguing.” she said, more to herself than him. “And, I hope we can have another dance. To make up for the one that was ...ummm....interrupted.”

Harry gave a half bow and said “I’d be glad to...ahh...would you both excuse me? I think I see Viktor Krum.”

“We have an interesting year coming, Pomona.” Flitwick observed. The two House Heads nodded at each other.

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The Durmstrang champion greeted him with enthusiasm. “Goot to zee you, Harry Potter!”

“And you Viktor.” replied Harry, exhausting his Bulgarian vocabulary.

Viktor laughed at him “Ve vill stay with Inglesh. Trivizard Champion and fighter you are, great ling-u-est you are not.”

“Thanks for nothing.” Harry shot back, with a grimace, but no real anger.

“No harm in that. For eggssample, I am a great Seeker.” Viktor gave just the right tone of voice and smirk.

Harry shrugged, nonchalantly, and countered “Ehh...saw you play...guess you’re alright.”

“Iz zat a challenge?” asked Viktor, growling slightly.

Harry glared at him and asked “Who said you were a challenge?”

“HOHO!” Viktor’s laugh boomed. “It is a date. Ve vill find the time!”

Harry grinned and nodded “Sounds like fun.”

“Sooo...speaking of dates...how is Hermione?” asked Viktor. “I was hoping to renew old frienzzipz.”

Harry was unsure as to how to address that one.

Viktor took in his expression. “She is not still dating Ron Veasley, I heard.”

“That’s true.” Harry acknowledged.

Looking disappointed Viktor concluded “Then, she has anuzzer boyfriend. I should not haf been surprised.”

“Well..I noooo.” Harry replied. “But, Hermione hasn’t had a lot of success with blokes lately.” He didn’t get the chance to offer further details as a pair of arms wrapped around his middle.

With a kiss on the back of his neck, Susan announced her presence and said “Mmmm Guess who?”

“Gee...Professor McGonagall” he replied.

She spun him around and grumbled “You really want her? Is she not a tad old?”

“Well...” said Harry and just left it hanging for a moment. Then, “Don’t want anyone else but you.”

Susan grinned and laid her arms around his neck “Smart answer.” she commented “I do tend to be a bit possessive.”

“Missed you.” he said, pulling her into a tender hug and inhaling her hair.

Tina groaned as if in pain and said “Boy you’d think it was a year instead of a day.”

“I do not mean to be rude---” Viktor interjected.

Harry turned slightly away from Susan's embrace and did the introductions "Sorry... this is my girlfriend, Susan Bones...her parents, Neil and Joan...."

The Bulgarian bowed and clicked his heels to each in turn. Viktor deliberately made a show of kissing Tina's hand causing the young girl to blush painfully. Though, having already become used to Harry's presence, she quickly recovered to start talking quite animatedly. What impressed him most was the Speaker of the Wizengamot "It is a distinct honor, Madam Bones." he said.

" I attended the World Cup two years ago." she replied "Unfortunately, much of my time had been was spent with my security duties. But, I must confess, I looked up more than once."

Viktor acknowledged the praise with a click of his heels. "Thank you Madam. However, I do know that Quidditch is, at most, a twenty year occupation. I do not wish to retire and sit in a rocking chair at forty. I hope you would not mind that I use your career as an inspiration."

"Feel free to owl me anytime." offered Amelia. "While I don't have any authority in Bulgaria, I do have friends."

Harry had been wondering that Hermione had underestimated his Triwizard rival. As if thinking of her made her appear, Sirius arrived by portkey with a girl on each arm. One being his best female friend, the other, reminded him of why Viktor's question concerned him. He just didn't know how to explain that she did not have a boyfriend, but rather, a girlfriend. He could only offer a shrug to the odd expression on Viktor's face.

"Hello Harry." said the dreamy voice of Luna Lovegood. She hugged him briefly, stood back and looked in his eyes "You have the look of someone who was very far away."

He nodded, but didn't want to offer details, so he took Neville's hand and said "Good to see you, too, mate."

“So, you are the young man that led my grandson into a fight against Death Eaters and You-Know-Who.” a frail looking, but formidable sounding, older witch.

Harry gulped and stuttered “Y-yes ma-ma’am.”

“I must say, I am deeply impressed.” Lady Longbottom declared “We truly did not think Neville had it in him.”

Embarrassed, Neville blushed “Grandmother!” he hissed.

“It would have been tragic had the Family squibbed out.” she continued.

Susan recognized the signs of a gathering fury in her boyfriend and interrupted “Lady Longbottom, my brother Frank is a Squib. And, I guarantee, on any day he could finish off a half a dozen Death Eaters before they had a chance to blink. That’s without a weapon.”

“In my day, children knew their place.” Lady Longbottom snapped “Show respect for your elders, girl.”

More than anyone else, Neville’s grandmother reminded Harry of his Uncle Vernon. But, after the momentary lapse with Sirius, he kept a tight rein on his new-found abilities. He physically got between the quarrelling witches and said, to the older “Then earn it by showing respect. Never talk down to Susan again.”

“WELL! I NEVER!” she exclaimed, fully outraged.

Luna looked back and forth between them and said “Well, maybe you should.”

“Do you ever suppose....” Susan commented “...we can go to any kind of event without a war.”

Without thought, Harry growled “If anyone disrupts ours, I kill’em.”

“Ours?” asked Susan “You interest me strangely, Mister Potter.”

Harry flinched slightly under the gaze of multiple Bones, but was spared further discomfort by the intervention of Gideon Prewett announcing the start of the wedding ceremony. Traditionally, Magical folk had the eldest family member officiate.

While seeking a seat, Harry felt the brush of a mental attack. He shoved it away and began seeking the source. He was scanning through the crowd when he saw his girlfriend frown for a moment. He never would have thought to touch Susan's mind, and certainly not without her permission. This time, Harry caught the source. It felt just like one of Flamel's probes. Legilimency, as wizards knew it, required the incantation and eye contact with the subject. What Harry had learned from Nicolas Flamel didn't. He mentally seized the probe and struck back. No one he could see gave any sign of pain, so he just kept on alert. Susan, Harry knew, was completely unaware of the cause of the momentary pain. But, he would have to tell her what had happened. For the time being, he just held her hand.

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A Wizarding wedding was similar to a Muggle one, but there are differences. The first was that the Wizarding world had no religious establishment. Two options existed for a couple. One was a ceremony performed by a senior member of one of the couple's families. Government officials, such as the Minister of Magic, Department Heads or Wizengamot members, were the other option. Wizards also did not have wedding parties as in the Muggle tradition. The couple would each walk away from their immediate family, to symbolize their independence, join hands, cross wands, and swear an oath. After which, they were married.

Muggle or Magical, the reception was the same. Everyone applauded as Bill and Fleur Weasley shared their first dance as a married couple. After the dance, the music cut off and they both put their wands to their throats and with the groom speaking English and the bride French, they thanked everyone for coming. Bill, with great pride announced "We have to admit, that we did move up the date from the original plan. You see, we're expecting a baby!"

“WE’RE GONNA BE UNCLES!” Fred and George yelled. Then, after a moment’s whispering consultation, shot fireworks from their wands which repeated the declaration in bright letters that glowed even in broad daylight.

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Fleur’s first dance (with a non-relative) was with Viktor Krum. The bride signaled her sister with a hand wave. Gabrielle Delacour had it bad for Harry Potter. During the Triwizard Tournament she had managed to learn broken English. Two years later, with the chance to see the brave boy who had dragged her from the lake, she had spent much of the summer studying and practicing. The youngster was just going into puberty. In a Veela, that meant wild pheromone swings.

Veela tended to attract younger members of the opposite sex, turning them into babbling idiots (just like Fleur had with Ron.) But, they were generally attracted to people older than themselves.

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“You do seem to attract the younger crowd, Harry.” Susan said, lightly, teasingly.

He was a little short with her and edgy about the earlier incident “I’m not leaving your side.”

“I’m a big girl, Harry.” she replied “Now, I wouldn’t mind having you around twenty-four/seven. But, Daddy might, at least without an engagement --- at minimum.”

He had to laugh. Then he got tense. He felt a probe on his mind, but it was gone before he could trace it. “It has to be Dumbledore poking around.” Harry said, suspiciously “But he isn’t supposed to even be here.”

“Oh go on!” she ordered “Make a little girl’s day! You did promise. And it would be even better if you went and asked her.”

Harry gave a crooked look “It wasn’t even my idea. It was Fleur’s.” he grumbled

“Live up to your celebrity, Potter!” she sneered in imitation. “Really, I’ll be fine. I’ll dance with Ron...or maybe one of the twins...Hermione, perhaps.”

The song ended with Harry part irritated about her Snape reference and part discomfited by the notion of Susan dancing with Hermione. Especially considering all he had to do was look at the two girls dancing together and replace Shirley’s blond hair with Susan’s red. The whole combination finally made him burst out laughing. He tilted Susan’s chin up and kissed her. “I guess the sooner I get it started the sooner I get back to you.” he sighed.

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“Hello Harry.” Gabrielle said, shyly, but in perfect, unaccented English.

Harry felt pressure on his senses. At first, he thought it was another mental attack. But, this time it was different. There was an overwhelming urge to ravage the younger girl. He concentrated, reminded himself of Susan and mentally shook off the feeling. “Would you care to dance?” he asked.

“Really? ... Me?” she asked, quite impressed.

Harry recognized the hero worship that he never thought he deserved. He refrained from rolling his eyes “Look, Gabrielle” he said “I’m just Harry, just Harry....Now...please dance with me before my girlfriend chews me out.”

“She told you to dance with me?” asked Gabrielle. In answer to his nod, she added “You really ...care... about each other?”

Harry took the girl’s hand in one of his and her waist in the other “You’re ...ouch...at Beaux ...ouch! battons Oooo!” She kept stepping on his feet.

“Sorry ... sorry... oops...s-sorry H-h-arry!” Gabrielle apologized each time.

He squeezed her shoulders and shook her a bit “Right, relax!” he ordered “I’m just like every other wizard. Scratch my ear with my wand---”

She giggled

“Grow gills for swimming---” he added, a clear Triwizard reference.

After that, Gabrielle was able to enjoy herself. She was actually a very graceful dancer. Another song later the pair was laughing together “Thank you for joking with me, Harry.” she said “I would never have gotten over my nervousness.”

“Strictly self defense.” he quipped “I really like my toes.” Scanning around, Harry was surprised to see Susan accepting a dance with Charlie Weasley. He walked over with Gabrielle to where Ron was standing with Hermione and Hannah and asked “How did that happen?”

“Call it an attempt to bury the hatchet.” replied Ginny as she walked up.

Mrs. Weasley had not changed her position and was un-conciliatory “A very adult thing to do.” she said tonelessly “Something you should try, Harry.”

“Did you ever apologize for the Howlers?” he asked, imitating her lack of tone.

Into the sudden silence, Hermione grabbed him and said “Come on, Harry, dance with me.”

“Fine.” he snarled, glaring balefully at the woman. He allowed Hermione to pull him to the floor and accepted the embrace. He was rather reluctant, but also compelled to start swaying to the music.



Hermione spun them around and strategically positioned him away from Mrs. Weasley “There now, is this not lovely?” she asked “You know, the last time we danced together was at the Yule Ball.”

“ Not true!” he exclaimed “What about last week at Frank’s wedding?!”

Hermione leaned in and kissed his cheek “How gallant of you to remember.” she laughed. Soon enough, she managed to get Harry to forget about Mrs. Weasley.

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It was nearly an hour after the incident with Molly. Arthur had yet another argument with his wife and had ordered her to keep her distance. The entire situation was impossible for him. He really couldn’t blame Harry, but things had quieted down when he wasn’t around.

“Could we dance, Harry?” asked Ginny.

He was in considerable demand, but he needed a break. Harry danced with each of the Bones women, Hannah, her mother; also he did a couple of songs with Fleur. He had now sat out several songs with Susan in his lap. To say that he was surprised by the request was an understatement. He glanced at Susan who half-shrugged a lack of objection. “Alright.” he replied.

“I don’t want to fight with you, but there are things I want to say. Can we do that without fighting?” she said. Ginny laid both of her arms on his neck.

Harry pulled one of her hands down and held it in a less intimate manner. “Let’s talk, then.” he replied,

“Right.” she replied with a sigh, it wasn’t the start she was hoping for “Ever since I got back I have been trying to make peace here. Ron and Mum don’t talk. Neither do Bill and Ron. The twins don’t visit

when only Mum is here. Dad's upset with basically everyone, me included."

Harry knew this from Ron and sympathized with his best friend, but Ginny was another matter "I know, so?" he inquired.

"Well, all of it started with what happened between you and I." she pointed out.

Feeling accused, he dropped her hand and snapped "You mean you accusing me of cheating when you were the one---"

"Seamus did that, remember!" Ginny countered "And, that's beside the point!"

Mention of the former Housemate did much to dissipate Harry's anger. He nodded and took her hand again "You've got a point." he admitted "But, what do you want from me?"

"Your argument was with me, not Bill, not Charlie, not my Mother." she answered. "If you can stop fighting with me... stop....with them."

Harry shook his and said "No! It started with you. But, they kept it up. And as far as I'm concerned, your Mother was the worst. McGonagall wanted apologies, I want them. Remember what her Howler said about Susan?"

"She was angry and defending me." Ginny explained.

He sniffed bitterly and retorted "You're as good as my own, Harry...I saved you and your Father...We can't thank you enough, Harry...Don't want her kind of thanks."

"She danced with Charlie." Ginny pointed out.

Harry frowned and said "Well, that's between she and Charlie. And she has a name. It's Susan. If you're trying to not fight you're not doing a good job."

“Urrg! I give up!” she yelled.

At the same instant, Harry felt the same type of attack he felt earlier. Only it was sharper, more personal and close. He doubled the power and struck back. “So it was you.” he concluded as his dance partner faltered.

“Oww!!” moaned Ginny as she clutched at her temple.

“And it was you earlier.” he accused, pitilessly “And this is for poking around in Susan’s head!” But to his surprise, his second strike bounced off.

Ginny didn’t bother retaliating again. “Don’t assume anyone is who they seem to be, Harry. I don’t.” she said “I’ll scan anyone that comes within range.”

“Stay the bloody hell outta Susan’s brain or I’ll fry yours!” he snarled, applying a crushing grip on her hand.

She ignored it, stared him straight in the eye and shot back “Not with a bolt like that you won’t.”

“Trelawney taught you?” he asked, disbelievingly.

Ginny shrugged and answered enigmatically, “Well..ll yes and no.”

“We’ll talk later, looks like I have no choice.” he said as the song ended.

Watching his retreating back, Ginny muttered “Great success, that was.”

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Alastor ‘Mad-Eye’ Moody positioned two Aurors at each of the compass points of the target house. He had already ordered each to lay down anti-Apparation and anti-Portkey hexes. One was generally enough for an area that size. But, he didn’t take chances. He, himself,

accompanied by three additional Aurors entered the grounds and he sought out his boss. Between the crowded dance floor, music and bright lights, three additional people were hardly noticed.

Amelia Bones was chatting, somewhat intimately, with Sirius Black. She had cast a minor privacy ward which could both be detected and overwhelmed by a determined individual. "Alastor!" she gasped, surprised at the interruption "What brings you here? You should be at headquarters."

"A certain case you ordered investigated without your involvement has broken." the scarred man said, brusquely.

It took only a moment for her to process. "I gather, from the display, your suspect is at this affair. To whom does the evidence point?" His whispered answer caused her eyes to bulge. She sat back in her chair, forcibly clutched Sirius' arm and told him. "Proceed, Auror Moody" she ordered formally "I had best remain seated."

"I'll kill them!!" Harry's Godfather snarled, pushing himself up.

Amelia yanked on him, causing him to fall back "And so will you!" she whispered harshly "THAT is a direct order!"

"Director." he acknowledged. Then, to his subordinates "You two, with me. Suspects are together. Which is fortunate. Did Potter have to be there!?"

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Harry heard the clop-thump clop-thump of Moody's approach and turned, with a smile "Hi, Professor." he said cordially.

"Move away, boy!" Moody ordered, wand at the ready.

Instantly angry at his uncle's insulting term for him, Harry snarled "What's up your arse?"

"Wand out ....slowly Weasley!" the Auror demanded.

Bill looked shocked.

Harry spun on the groom, simply curious. Then came the charges.

“William Weasley you are under arrest.” one of the subordinates said “The charges are assault, two counts, attempted murder, two counts and one count of unlawful use of a Dementor.”

Betrayal, then rage, surged through Harry. After the incident with his Godfather he had carefully separated his emotions from his abilities. “IS IT TRUE!!” he roared.

“CHARLES WEASLEY! HALT!” yelled Moody. He glanced at his other subordinate and nodded “Sharpe!”

The Auror pointed his wand and Charlie and cast “Imperio!” a moment later, he called out “Surrender!”

“RRRrrrrrahhh!” the #2 Weasley grunted with effort. A fully trained Occlumens, he managed to shake off the spell. It didn’t help him, except momentarily, against Harry. He had never felt anything like it before. Charlie’s brain literally felt as if it was on fire. He was not even allowed the release of screaming as the presence filtered through his memories.

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“SHALL I SHOW YOU WHAT I SUFFERED!?” Harry’s thoughts boomed. Once before, he showed his friends the pain the Dursleys put him through. But, that was using a Pensieve. It put you in the memory without making you part of it. At Hogsmeade, a year ago, Harry had been exposed to his worst memories before destroying a Dementor. Then, all but beaten to death. Normally, Harry avoided memories of that day. Now, he dredged up every kick, every punch he felt along with the horrible guilt that consumed him when Susan had collapsed against the alley wall.

Charlie's mind nearly broke under the assault. For the hapless man was actually living through exactly what Harry had. Two things kept him out of the Permanent Ward at St. Mungo's. One was Harry's lack of experience with what he was doing. The other was Ginny's intervention. She forcefully blocked Harry's attack and shielded her brother.

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"Take'em both away!" Moody ordered.

The shocked silence that pervaded the gathering was shattered by Mrs. Weasley, who screamed "NOOOO!!!!"

"Shaddup Molly!" commanded Moody. "Or you'll join'em in confinement!"

She ignored the Senior Auror and went into her dress.

"Expelliarmus!" Moody struck without a second thought and far faster than Molly could.

Mrs. Weasley's unconscious form ploughed through a couple of tables. The open air environment of the wedding reception spared her from crashing into a wall.

The other Aurors were called in and the wards were taken down. Two each disappeared with Bill and Charlie. Two more prepared to follow with Mrs. Weasley, but Amelia intervened and ordered them not to. The remaining Weasleys, together with the Delacours, gathered around trying to come to terms with the disaster.

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"Harry, are you alright?" Sirius finally penetrated his Godson's foggy awareness.

Unaware that his legs were even shaky, Harry was suddenly supported by Sirius and Remus. Funny, that, he didn't really

remember the werewolf's attendance. They helped him into a chair.  
"D-did w-wh-at hap-pen r-real-ly...? he asked, weakly

"If you mean, were Bill and Charlie just arrested?" Sirius replied  
"Then, yes. Amelia had to go file the formal charges."

"What happened to you?" asked a highly concerned Susan.

Harry shook his head and replied "Nothing, I'm fine." His attempt to stand up met with failure as he fell back into the chair.

"Je ne... zorry" Fleur began, her French becoming more dominant with stress "Arree, if Guillian did zis... for true... I am tres zorry."

"Not your fault, Fleur." he replied. His voice was steady, even if his balance wasn't. "Sorry... y'know... about the wedding."

She bent over and kissed his forehead, telling him "You are a kind, thoughtful man, Harry Potter."

"Thanks Fleur." he replied "I hope—"

She just nodded and left.

"Dull, you do not do." observed Viktor Krum "Vas a goot time until---"  
He could only shrug.

Hermione, accompanied by Shirley, walked up to him and ran her fingers through his hair "Viktor did not have quite the goot time he thought he did. I feel like I need to say --- do --- something for Ronald."

"Lemme com---" Harry began.

Susan restrained him saying "Slowly, Harry."

"Don't baby me, Sue." he complained. But realizing how that might have sounded, he added "Give me a hand, please."

She gave a sad nod and complied “Bloody green eyes.” she muttered “Can’t resist’em.”

“Thanks.” Harry said, enjoying the warm feeling her arm around his waist gave. He kissed her temple and put an arm around her shoulder.

“Did you suspect?” asked Susan “Didja even guess?”

Shrugging, he replied “No...Yes...Maybe... I dunno.”

“Cleared that up.” she commented, sarcastically.

Together, they walked across the lawn to where the in-law families were. Except for the situation, Ron probably would have been having an exceptionally good time. Hannah Abbott was sitting on his knee. And Hermione Granger was cuddling into him, stroking his arm.

“Hey, mate.” Harry began. As positioning happened to have it, he had approached his friend from behind. He laid a hand on Ron’s neck.

The youngest Weasley boy snapped, spun in the chair and slapped Harry’s hand away. Incidentally, he upset the rather fragile seating arrangement dumping both Hannah and Hermione to the grass. Ron fell on top of them “See what you did, Potter!” he shouted, accusingly “Bugger off!!”

“That’s not fair, Ron.” Hannah told him as she struggled to her feet “None of this is Harry’s fault.”

“My brothers just got taken from his own wedding!” he countered, increasingly incoherent and loud “YOU TAKE HIS SIDE! WELL BUGGER YOU TOO!!”

Hannah swung back and slapped him.

Blinded by anger, Ron was ready to return the favor. Just before he swung, he stopped himself. Mr. Abbott was not about to let his daughter get hit. He petrified Ron.



“Expelliarmus!” yelled Sirius. He made a slashing motion with his wand that yanked a dozen wands out of their owners’ hands

Remus gently pushed his friend’s wand down and said “It might be wise for everyone to settle down. Fighting amongst ourselves will not change anything.”

“Plus I will arrest the next person who throws a punch or a spell.” Tonks put in.

Hermione was going to unpetrify Ron, but Ginny stopped her “Let it wear off, he needs to calm down.” she advised “Harry, Ron is just worried about Bill and Charlie ...you can understand, huh?”

“Mind your own business!” Harry growled. Ginny in the role of peacemaker irritated him. Add to it, Ron’s outburst and he’d had enough “Ron was the first to want payback for what happened at Hogsmeade!”

Mrs. Weasley stepped forward, outraged “GET OFF MY PROPERTY! YOU ARE NOT WELCOME HERE!”

“Nothing new in that.” he shot back, coldly. Harry was tempted to give her a headache, but that was an abuse of his abilities. “They used a Dementor on us. I hope they get the same!”

It was as if a Silencio had been cast on the entire area. Everyone looked at each other in shocked silence. Possible outcomes hadn’t even registered. But, his angry remark presented an all too plausible outcome. The accumulation of charges against the oldest Weasley siblings was severe enough.

“I think we should go, Harry.” said Sirius.

Harry gave the prone Ron a dirty look and said “The sooner, the better. Hey Ron! Think maybe you can get Malfoy to come up with more Potter Stinks badges?” He knew Ron was incapable of

answering, so he just stalked off. As much as his friend's outburst had hurt, Harry was just as determined not to let it show.

"Wait!" yelled Susan as she ran after him. "Wait for me!"

Harry paused between steps and tried to clear his expression. His efforts didn't reach his voice "What?" he asked gruffly.

"I'm lost." she replied "The last thing I'm sure of is that Bill and Charlie just got arrested for the attacking us in Hogsmeade. After that, well, I'm not even...what do I even ask? Everything happened so fast."

The remaining Marauders had caught up with the young couple "I saw Charlie break Rob's Imperio." Sirius said "You stopped him, didn't you Harry?"

"Yeah, I did." he replied in a flat tone. He was less than pleased with himself. His shoulders sagged and he admitted "And then some. I nearly...well...it would've been worse than murder."

Susan shook her head firmly "Uh-uh! I don't believe it!" she declared "My Harry would never commit murder."

"But I---" he protested.

She cut him off, firmly shaking his shoulders "You-Know-Who murders! Killing for personal gain or revenge, that's murder."

"You don't---" he started.

But, again Susan overrode him "---know what it's like to kill." she finished the thought "Harry, I used the Avada---"

"Cut it, Suzy!" ordered Hannah "Look, I'm not a solicitor, but even I know not to talk about a case with the enemy around!"

Harry sighed, feeling very sad "Just like that..." he mumbled "...six years of friendship --- gone."

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While some were dealing with the emotional impact of the day's events, others were looking at it as an opportunity to create havoc. Percy Weasley had not been especially noticeable during his eldest brother's wedding. This had been by design. He slipped into the woods behind his house without anyone the wiser. "Madam, you must assist my brothers. They have been arrested." he reported "And it is all due to that miserable Potter."

"Calm yourself, Weasley." Umbridge ordered "Of course, I will be assisting your family. You have been very loyal to me."

Percy smiled under the praise and replied "Thank you, Madam. But, I do not understand what you can do. How can you, after Dumbledore and Bones took over the government?"

"Let me worry about that." she replied, firmly "This is only a minor setback."

Percy repeated "This is only a minor setback."

"Do you trust me, Weasley?" she asked.

Percy had complete faith in his former boss "Unquestioningly." he replied.

"Very good." she said, smiling sweetly. "Your trust is one of the few things that keep me going. Once things return to normal I will see you greatly rewarded."

Percy bowed and his eyes gleamed with visions of the future "I look forward to that day. What are your orders?"

"Continue on at Hogwarts as you have." she replied "It is vital that you continue to deepen the division between your family and Potter. Half-bloods are unworthy of associating with your noble heritage."

Recognizing a dismissal, he bowed deeply and departed.

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“Report, Delores.” Lord Voldemort ordered.

Sighing, melodramatically, she said “Kindly remember, we are allies. I am not one of these non-entities to be ordered around. Now, my spy--  
\_”

“And what spy is this?” he queried. His tone was smooth, but under it he seethed at the witch’s continued impudence.

Using the same sweet smile that she used on school children, Umbridge replied “My spy... and it has come to my attention that the two oldest Weasley brats have been charged with trying to kill Potter and his whore last year.”

“Of little importance.” the Dark Lord said, disinterestedly. “Blood traitors, all of them.”

She shrugged “On the surface perhaps. It might be of interest that I can confirm their guilt. At my bidding, our former Minister supplied the Dementor for that action.”

“And, had they succeeded, it would have been of value.” he sneered “Are you planning to testify, my ally? I am sure you would be welcomed with open arms.”

Lucius Malfoy stepped forward and went on one knee “Forgive me, My Lord.” he said “But, it does offer an opportunity to divide your enemies.” The senior Malfoy was now on the run with his master after the debacle at the Department of Mysteries.

“Speak, my slippery friend.” the Dark Lord said “But, be warned. You are not in my good graces at the moment.”

Not allowing his displeasure to show, Lucius explained “My son has repeatedly reported Potter’s obsessive loyalty to his friends. If we

were to offer the unfortunate Weasleys our assistance, indirectly of course --- I suggest using a friendly solicitor's services. He could, under the guise of charity twist the situation to our benefit."

"If nothing else, I could end up with a spy in the old fool's circle. Rather necessary after your failure --- Do you not agree, Severus?" Voldemort nodded "Very well, see to it, Lucius."

Hogwarts' former Potions Master was a panting, emaciated wreck. He had hung, magically stuck to the wall of the Dark Lord's throne room ever since the battle at Spinner's End. Vital supplies and information had been secreted in Snape's house. Plans and schemes for the remote future were lost. By far, what had truly earned the Dark Lord's rage, was a map to the locations of his most precious artifacts.

Had Voldemort still not needed him, he would have obliterated Snape. He waved his wand at the tormented man and cast "Finite...The rest of you can go. Severus, there are several potions that I require your skills for. Fail me in this and I will make you beg for death."

"Perhaps I can assist." offered Umbridge.

Voldemort mock bowed and sneered "I think not, ally. I trust few...and you... not at all."

"You wound me, my lord." she retorted. Where most gave the title out of respect and fear, she turned it to an insult.

The Dark Lord disappeared and reappeared right in front of her. He towered more than a foot above even the witch's hat and glared down, threateningly "One day, one day... soon!"

"Perhaps...Thomas...you would care to try a Killing Curse." she suggested.

Enraged, Voldemort dug his wand into her throat and began to do so. Then, mastering his fury, pulled back "Provoke me again, Madam, and I will have MacNair remove your head and mount it like a House Elf's! COME SEVERUS! IMPERIO!"

“Good day, my lord.” said Umbridge.

CHP42